

EASTERN CHRISTIAN TEXTS IN TRANSLATION

NARSAI: THE HOMILIES

Volume 1

Aaron M. BUTTS – Kristian S. HEAL
Robert A. KITCHEN

PEETERS

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VOLUME I

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EASTERN CHRISTIAN TEXTS IN TRANSLATION

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6

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PREFACE

For a number of years, the three editors of this volume have directed a collaborative project that aims to produce English translations of all the extant homilies of the foundational East Syriac theologian, poet, and exegete Narsai (d. ca. 500). This project has taken many turns over the years, from translations only, to study editions with the Syriac texts set alongside translations, to full critical editions with translations, only to return to translations alone. Our aim has, however, always included the publication of English translations, produced by a team of scholars, of the extant homilies of Narsai.

Along the project's at times winding way, a workshop on Narsai was held in 2017 at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. At this workshop, a number of translators associated with the project, as well as a few others, had the opportunity to share early gleanings from their sustained readings of Narsai. The fruits of this workshop were collected and published in A. M. Butts, K. S. Heal, and R. A. Kitchen (eds.), *Narsai: Rethinking his Work and his World* (STAC 121; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020).

In addition to that edited volume, the first two editors, together with S. P. Brock, published *Clavis to the Metrical Homilies of Narsai* (CSCO 690; Louvain: Peeters, 2021). Building upon foundational articles by W. F. Macomber and S. P. Brock,¹ this *Clavis* aimed to lay out systematically the homilies of Narsai, including their manuscript attestation, along with relevant bibliography.

These two volumes notwithstanding, the goal of our collaborative endeavors has always been to publish English translations of the homilies of Narsai. With the present volume, we offer the first batch of translations that have resulted from this collaborative project. This volume includes translations of six of Narsai's homilies, each translated by a different translator.

Over the course of this project, we have struggled over how much editorial intervention, especially standardization, we should impose. Ultimately, we have decided to adopt a relatively laissez-faire approach. As we see it, the study of Narsai is in many ways still

¹ W. F. Macomber, "The Manuscripts of the Metrical Homilies of Narsai," *OCP* 39 (1973): 275–306; S. P. Brock, "A Guide to Narsai's Homilies," *Hugoye* 12 (2009): 21–40.

in its infancy. Just as an illustration: Of the homilies translated in this volume, none has ever been translated into English, and only *Homily 8 'On Peter and Paul'* has been translated into another language (in this case German). Given the state of the field, it is still far from clear to us what the best solution ultimately is for the translation of many words and phrases in Narsai. Consider, for instance, a word with great theological import for Narsai, *remzā*. Narsai uses *remzā* to reference the physical gesture (nod or wink) by which God indicates the divine will, in contrast to the *puqdānā*, “command,” that is heard.² How is *remzā* best rendered in English? This question is especially complicated for a volume such as this one, which we hope is useful not only for specialists in Syriac studies but also for a wider group of scholars working on Late Antiquity more broadly. And, this question can be applied *mutatis mutandis* to so many other words and phrases in Narsai, from the mundane to the significant. Instead of trying to answer such translation questions definitively here in the first volume, we have thought it best to delay judgment and not standardize the translation of individual terms and phrases. In addition, we have given the translators freedom in their style and not attempted to impose a single translation technique. Thus, this volume truly is a collaborative work bringing together translations by different translators, each employing a unique style and technique.

Each of the translations is provided with a brief introduction that aims to provide relevant background, including bibliography. The poetry has been laid out in couplets as demarcated in the Syriac manuscripts. Though a number is printed only for the first line of each couplet, the numbering reflects each line of poetry, *not* each couplet. In the margins to the translations, readers will find references to the Syriac source text, with either the abbreviation M or P, referring to the editions of Mingana and of the Patriarchal Press, respectively.³ Readers will also find there references to biblical passages, which range from direct quotations to (potential) allusions.

We intend for the present volume to be the first in a series that will ultimately provide English translations of all the surviving homilies of Narsai. In fact, several volumes are already in various stages of production. Like this volume, some volumes will include translations, by different translators, of a range of homilies on diverse topics, such as a

² See still the appended note entitled “Some Remarks on the Origin and Use of the Term Remzā in Syriac Hexaemeral Literature,” in T. Jansma, “Barhebraeus’ Scholion on the Words ‘Let there be Light’ (Gen. I, 3) as Presented in his ‘Storehouse of Mysteries’,” *Abr-Nahrain* 13 (1972), 100–114 (109–112).

³ A. Mingana, *Narsai Doctoris Syri Homiliae et Carmina* (Mosul: Typis Fratrum Praedicatorum, 1905); Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII, *Homilies of Mar Narsai* (San Francisco: Patriarchal Press, 1970).

volume currently in the final stages of production, edited by Robert Kitchen and Fr. Andrew Younan. Other volumes will focus on a particular theme, such as a volume on reproof, which is again in the final stages of production, that is the sole work of Adam Becker. All of these volumes will be published under the auspices of the collaborative project *Narsai: The Homilies*, currently directed by the three editors of this volume, in the series Eastern Christian Texts in Translation (Peeters Press).

Aaron M. Butts
Kristian S. Heal
Robert A. Kitchen

ABBREVIATIONS

General

ed.	edited
fn.	footnote
p(p).	page(s)
Syr.	Syriac
trans.	translation

Journals, Series, and Reference Works

AJEC	Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity
BCOT	Bible in the Christian Orthodox Tradition
CCSG	Corpus Christianorum. Series Graeca
CSCO	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
ECS	Eastern Christian Studies
GECS	Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies
<i>GEDSH</i>	S. P. Brock, A. M. Butts, G. A. Kiraz, L. Van Rompay (eds.), <i>Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage</i> (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2011)
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>Hugoye</i>	<i>Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies</i>
<i>JAAS</i>	<i>Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies</i>
<i>JECS</i>	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
<i>JQR</i>	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LAHR	Late Antique History and Religion
LSAWS	Linguistic Studies in Ancient West Semitic
OCA	Orientalia Christiana Analecta
OLA	Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta
<i>PG</i>	P. Migne, <i>Patrologia Graeca</i>
PO	Patrologia Orientalis

<i>RAC</i>	T. Klausner et al. (eds.), <i>Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum</i> (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1950–)
SC	Sources Chrétiennes
SH	Subsidia Hagiographica
<i>SOPJ</i>	<i>Syriac Orthodox Patriarchal Journal</i>
SP	Studia Patristica
STAC	Studies and Texts in Antiquity and Christianity
<i>SymSyr</i> IV	H. J. W. Drijvers, R. Lavenant, C. Molenberg, and G. J. Reinink (eds.), <i>IV Symposium Syriacum, 1984. Literary Genres in Syriac Literature (Groningen – Oosterhesselen 10–12 September)</i> (OCA 229; Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1987)
TEG	Traditio Exegetica Graeca
TSAJ	Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism
TTH	Translated Texts for Historians
VC	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>

CITATION OF *HOMILIES* BY NARSAI

Homilies by Narsai are cited according to the conventional numbering system, as established in A. Mingana, *Narsai Doctoris Syri Homiliae et Carmina* (Mosul: Typis Fratrum Praedicatorum, 1905). Short-titles are optionally included, based on A. M. Butts, K. S. Heal, and S. P. Brock, *Clavis to the Metrical Homilies of Narsai* (CSCO 690; Louvain: Peeters, 2021), which generally follows S. P. Brock, “A Guide to Narsai’s Homilies,” *Hugoye* 12 (2009): 21–40. In addition to the homily number (and optional short-title), reference is made to one of the published editions, when available, in the following format: *Homily 3* ‘*On the Revelation of Abraham*’ (ed. Mingana 1.58.4), where “1” refers to the volume, “58” refers to the page, and “4” refers to the line. Abbreviations for the published editions are as follows:

Frishman	J. Frishman, <i>The Ways and Means of the Divine Economy: An Edition, Translation and Study of Six Biblical Homilies by Narsai</i> (Ph.D. Diss., Universiteit Leiden, 1992).
Gignoux	P. Gignoux, <i>Homélies de Narsai sur la création</i> (PO 34.2–4; Turnhout: Brepols, 1968).
McLeod	F. G. McLeod, <i>Narsai’s Metrical Homilies on the Nativity, Epiphany, Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension</i> (PO 40.1; Turnhout: Brepols, 1979).
Mingana	A. Mingana, <i>Narsai Doctoris Syri Homiliae et Carmina</i> (Mosul: Typis Fratrum Praedicatorum, 1905).
Patriarchal Press	Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII, <i>Homilies of Mar Narsai</i> (San Francisco: Patriarchal Press, 1970).
Siman	E. P. Siman, <i>Narsai. Cinq homélies sur les paraboles évangéliques</i> (Paris: Cariscript, 1984).

If a homily has not yet been edited, a reference to manuscript and folio are provided, using the same format as above, *mutatis mutandis*, e.g., *Homily 32* ‘*On the Canaanite Women*’ (ms. Vat. Syr. 594, f. 58a.3–4), where ‘3–4’ refers to the lines.

A reference to a previously-published translation is sometimes added in the parenthesis, as in the following: *Homily 39* (ed. Mingana 1.359; trans. R. H. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909], 36).

A similar citation system is used for homilies by Narsai's contemporary Jacob of Serugh, with the abbreviation "Bedjan" referring to P. Bedjan, *Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis* (Paris–Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1905–1910).

TRANSCRIPTION OF SYRIAC

Consonants

Syriac consonants are transcribed as ʾ, *b*, *g*, *d*, *h*, *w*, *z*, *ḥ*, *ṭ*, *y*, *k*, *l*, *m*, *n*, *s*, ʿ, *p*, *ṣ*, *q*, *r*, *š*, and *t*.

Vowels

<i>Transcription</i>	<i>Syriac Name</i>	<i>Examples</i>	
<i>a</i>	<i>ptāḥā</i>	<i>malkā</i>	ܡܠܟܐ
<i>ā</i>	<i>zqāṭpā</i>	<i>hāšā</i>	ܚܫܐ
<i>e</i>	<i>rbāṣā</i>	<i>lebbā</i>	ܠܒܐ
<i>ē</i>	<i>rbāṣā (karyā)</i>	<i>lēḥyā</i>	ܠܚܝܐ
<i>i</i>	<i>ḥbāṣā</i>	<i>bišā</i>	ܒܝܫܐ
<i>u</i>	<i>ʿšāṣā</i>	<i>gušmā</i>	ܓܘܫܡܐ
<i>o</i>	<i>ʿšāṣā rwiḥā</i>	<i>gšom</i>	ܓܫܡܐ

Other

- Schwa is not indicated, e.g., *kṭab* ‘he wrote’ and not *kəṭab*.
- Gemination is indicated, e.g., *lebbā* ‘heart’ and not *lebā*.
- Spirantization (*rukkāḱā*) is marked as *b*, *ḡ*, *d*, *k*, *p*, and *ṭ*, e.g., *kṭab* and not *ktab*.
- *Matres lectionis* are not indicated, e.g., *gušmā* for ܓܘܫܡܐ with the *waw* not indicated.
- Apart from *matres lectionis*, ‘silent’ consonants (i.e., those with *mbaṭṭlānā*) are written within parenthesis, e.g., *malkaw(hy)* ‘his kings’ and *biš(h)u* ‘he is evil’.

Example

[illegible]

brēšit *ʾitaw(hy)* (h)wā *melltā* whu *mellta* *ʾitaw(hy)* (h)wā *lwāt* *ʾalāhā*

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO READING NARSAI

Kristian S. HEAL

Narsai (d. ca. 500) witnessed the Christian world rent in pieces over the debates surrounding the First Council of Ephesus (431), the Second Council of Ephesus (449), and the Council of Chalcedon (451).¹ His political, social, and environmental world was no less troubled.² Even Narsai's life reflects the turmoil of the times. He rose from student to celebrated head of the School of the Persians in Edessa, the most important Christian school east of Antioch, but he was also an exile from that same school.³ He was the founding director and chief interpreter of the School of Nisibis, the intellectual heart of the nascent Church of the East, but his mode of discourse was rejected by his successors.⁴ He was a poet-theologian and heir to Ephrem, but also an important heir and defender of the Antiochenes Diodore, Nestorius, and Theodore. He was schooled in the shadow

* I am grateful to Adam Becker, Aaron Butts, and Robert Kitchen for improving this introduction with their valuable comments and suggestions.

¹ The main sources for Narsai's life are the *Ecclesiastical History* (F. Nau, *La première partie de l'Histoire de Barhadbešabba 'Arbaia* [PO 23.2; Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1932], 588–615) and the *Cause of the Foundation of the Schools* (A. Scher, *Mar Barhadbšabba 'Arbaya, Évêque de Halwan [VI^e siècle]. Cause de la fondation des écoles* [PO 4.4; Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1908], 383–387), both attributed to Barhadbšhabba (late 6th / early 7th cent.). The relevant passages are conveniently translated in A. H. Becker, *Sources for the Study of the School of Nisibis* (TTH 50; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 47–72; 151–153. The authorship question is treated in Becker, *Sources*, 11–16. As others have noted, a thorough study of the life, thought, and world of Narsai remains a desideratum.

² See Narsai, *Homily 12 'On the Evil of the Time'* translated by Lucas Van Rompay in this volume.

³ See A. H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 41–76 for a discussion of the sources related to the closing of the School of Edessa.

⁴ A nice example of the difference between Narsai and later East Syrian literature is given in A. H. Becker, "Mār Addai Scher and the Recovery of East Syrian Scholastic Culture," in M. Perkams and A. M. Schilling (eds.), *Griechische Philosophie und Wissenschaft bei den Ostsyriern: Zum Gedenken an Mār Addai Scher (1867–1915)* (Transmissions 3; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2020), 13–28 (20–25). Becker focused on the popular "Cause" genre and concluded that, "When we compare the cause literature to, for example, the poetical homilies (*mēmre*) of Narsai, there are only few overlaps between the works of the founder of the school and texts written just a few decades later." (25).

of Ephrem's grave, but he was exiled to Ephrem's birthplace just over a century after Ephrem's own forced exile to Edessa.⁵

Narsai was certainly occupied throughout his working life with teaching and administrative responsibilities. However, to adapt the words of the renowned Americanist Perry Miller, the real life of Narsai was the life of the mind.⁶ He was remembered primarily for "the orderliness of his thought and . . . his care of learning."⁷ The importance of Narsai's intellectual life must be borne in mind even as we consider what little may be said of his biography.⁸ For Narsai spent his life in the schools, first near his childhood home of 'Ayn Dulba, near Ma'alta in northern Mesopotamia,⁹ within the Sassanian Empire, then with his uncle, the abbot of the Monastery of Kfar Mari, west of the Tigris, where he was said to be "more illuminated in learning than the teachers and brothers who were there."¹⁰ At an uncertain age, he entered the School of Edessa, and like many gifted and dedicated students who enter elite institutions, he chose never to leave. Despite being called back

⁵ Such a contrast only pertains if one accepts the traditional account of Ephrem's life, which has him spending the last decade in Edessa. Though conventionally accepted, Ephrem's Edesean stay is not immune to scrutiny (J. P. Amar, "Making Ephrem One of Us," in A. M. Butts and R. D. Young [eds.], *Syriac Christian Culture: Beginnings to Renaissance* [Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2020], 3–36 [10–12]).

⁶ P. Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1949), xi: "The real life of Jonathan Edwards was the life of his mind."

⁷ Nau, *L'histoire*, 603 (the two phrases in Syriac are *mṭakksutā dḥuṣbēh* and *yāṣṣiputā dabuyullpānā*); Becker, *Sources*, 61 (adapted).

⁸ Narsai's biography is summarized with insightful concision in L. Van Rompay, "Narsai," in *GEDSH*, 303–304; and, most recently, with copious references, in A. M. Butts, "Narsai's Life and Work," in A. M. Butts, K. S. Heal, and R. A. Kitchen (eds.), *Narsai: Rethinking his Work and his World* (STAC 121; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 1–8. Earlier overviews are, in chronological order: A. Mingana, *Narsai Doctoris Syri Homiliae et Carmina*, 2 vols. (Mosul: Typis Fratrum Praedicatorum, 1905), 1:5–9; A. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur, mit Ausschluss der christlich-palästinensischen Texte* (Bonn: A. Marcus und E. Weber, 1922), 109–113; E. Tisserant, "Narsai" in *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* 11 (1931), 26–30; A. Vööbus, *History of the School of Nisibis* (CSCO 266; Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1965), 57–121; S. Gerö, *Barṣauma of Nisibis and Persian Christianity in the Fifth Century* (CSCO 426; Louvain: Peeters, 1981), 60–72; P. Gignoux, *Homélies de Narsai sur la création* (PO 34.3–4; Turnhout / Paris: Brepols, 1968), 1–5; F. G. McLeod, "The Soteriology of Narsai" (Doctor of Oriental Studies Diss., Pontificium Institutum Orientale, 1968), 1–30; J. Frishman, "The Ways and Means of the Divine Economy: An Edition, Translation and Study of Six Biblical Homilies by Narsai" (PhD Diss., Universiteit Leiden, 1992), III: 1–6.

⁹ Nau, *L'histoire*, 590, 594–595; Becker, *Sources*, 49, 53–54. Narsai's virtue is emphasized in these passages, but also his genius: "The holy one when he was seven years old went to the school for youths, and from the fervour of his love and the speedy movements of his soul, in nine months' time he memorized the whole Psalter" (Becker, *Sources*, 53); "The holy one was in this school for a period of nine years. He even exceeded his master in instruction" (Becker, *Sources*, 54).

¹⁰ Nau, *L'histoire*, 596; Becker, *Sources*, 54–55.

twice to his uncle's monastery to teach, both times he returned to Edessa as soon as possible.¹¹ He eventually rose to the rank of interpreter and director. His dedication to the school did not stop him from being expelled, however. It was also his dedication to the curative power of education that doubtless compelled him to accept the invitation to found the School of Nisibis, and thus initiate the great intellectual tradition of the Church of the East.¹² Narsai was certainly not unaware of the world around him, but he seems happiest when immersed in intellectual activity, especially the study of scripture. Again and again, he was called back to the sacred texts, and again and again he found new treasures of understanding there.¹³ He eagerly shared these treasures with his students, and subsequently, in transmission, with generations of scholars and congregants who heard, read, and copied his homilies for posterity.¹⁴

Works

Nearly eight centuries after Narsai's death, the learned 'Abdisho bar Brikha compiled a list of the literary works read in and produced by the Church of the East. To Narsai he attributes:

Commentaries on Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, (Joshua) Bar Nun, Judges, Qohelet, Isaiah, the Twelve (prophets), Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Prophecy of Daniel as well as *mēmre* in twelve volumes, 360 in number. He also had a liturgy and an interpretation of the sacraments and baptism as well as consolations with sermons, praises, proclamations, adorations, and a book on the depravity of life.¹⁵

One part of 'Abdisho lists is derived from Barḥadbshabba's *Ecclesiastical History*, where Narsai is said to have composed "one memra for each day of the year" divided "into twelve volumes."¹⁶ Perhaps other, now lost, sources attribute commentaries and the other

¹¹ Nau, *L'histoire*, 596–597; Becker, *Sources*, 55–56.

¹² Nau, *L'histoire*, 606–608; Becker, *Sources*, 63–65. Discussed in Gerö, *Barṣauma of Nisibis*; Vööbus, *History of the School of Nisibis*; Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom*, 77–97.

¹³ See the opening of Narsai, *Homily 1 'On Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets'* in this volume, translated by Sidney Griffith.

¹⁴ The best guide to the works of Narsai is now A. M. Butts, K. S. Heal, and S. P. Brock, *Clavis to the Metrical Homilies of Narsai* (CSCO 690; Louvain: Peeters, 2021).

¹⁵ Butts, Heal, and Brock, *Clavis to the Metrical Homilies of Narsai*, V, based on the text edited in J. S. Assemani, *Bibliotheca orientalis Clementino-Vaticana* (Rome: Typis Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide, 1719–1728), 3.1.63–66.

¹⁶ Nau, *L'histoire*, 612; Becker, *Sources*, 69.

works to Narsai as mentioned by ‘Abdisho.¹⁷ Or, perhaps this is an extrapolation of the other early source, also attributed to Barḥadbeshabba, which says that Narsai “composed up to three hundred homilies, and more including his other writings.”¹⁸ It is certainly likely that there were once around 300 *mēmre*. However, it is doubtful that Narsai wrote most of the other works attributed to him in later tradition, especially the commentaries.¹⁹ Now, however, only 82 *mēmre* attributed to Narsai survive, in addition to which there are two *mēmre* known only by incipit.²⁰ Among these, at least five *mēmre* are thought to be spurious.²¹

Building on Gignoux’s useful classification of the homilies of Narsai, I will describe the corpus under seven headings: liturgy, Christology, eschatology, Old Testament, New Testament, rebuke and moral formation, and other homilies that do not fit in these categories.²² This is an imperfect classification system to be sure, but it is a useful way to organize, summarize, and present a substantial collection of homilies.

Liturgical Homilies

Narsai’s surviving liturgical homilies are limited to an extended commentary on the baptismal liturgy split over two homilies (38, 39),²³ and a homily on priesthood and the role of priests in the church (59). There is also a well-known liturgical homily attributed

¹⁷ See, for example, the list in the tenth-century *Chronicle of Seert* (A. Scher, *Histoire nestorienne [Chronique de Séert]. Seconde Partie [I]* [PO 7.2; Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1910], 115), which knows the *Ecclesiastical History* of Barḥadbeshabba, but also other sources that attribute specific works to Narsai.

¹⁸ Scher, *Cause*, 386; Becker, *Sources*, 153.

¹⁹ Scher, *Histoire nestorienne*, 115 fn. 5.

²⁰ Nau, *L’histoire*, 613; Becker, *Sources*, 70; These are memra 83 and 84 in Butts, Heal, and Brock, *Clavis*, 78–79.

²¹ Frishman, *Ways and Means*, III: 11–15, further to the suggestions of Mingana and McLeod, considers *mēmre* 15, 30, 35, 43, and 60 as spuriously attributed. Butts considers only *mēmre* 30, 35, and 43 to be demonstrably spurious (“Narsai’s Life and Work,” 6 fn. 24). There are also several dialogue poems that are misattributed to Narsai.

²² Gignoux, *Homélies de Narsai*, 427–429. Full bibliography for each of the homilies cited is found in Butts, Heal, and Brock, *Clavis to the Metrical Homilies of Narsai*. I base the summary on existing translations and the survey of the corpus found in I. Ibrahim, “La Doctrine Christologique de Narsai. Essai d’interprétation” (Thèse de doctorat en théologie, Pontificia Studiorum Universitas A. S. Thoma Aq. in Urbe, 1974), 97–222.

²³ On these texts, see N. Witkamp, *Tradition and Innovation: Baptismal Rite and Mystagogy in Theodore of Mopsuestia and Narsai of Nisibis* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

to Narsai: *'On the Exposition of the Mysteries'* (35), which is a commentary on the Eucharist. This homily, however, is thought to be spurious.

Christological Homilies

Narsai's theological works can be classified as either Christological or eschatological. Five of the Christological homilies treat Christology in relation to the Nativity (4), Epiphany (6), Passion (36), Resurrection (40), and Ascension of Christ (45).²⁴ Another explores the theology of the incarnation in an exposition of John 1:14 (81). These six homilies are distinguished by their polemical content and seem to have been written over the course of Narsai's life.²⁵ Another homily, entitled *'On Mary'* (5), treats the incarnation in the context of Adam's creation in the image of God and the transmission of that image through various Old Testament figures. A final homily (29) shows how Jesus is the Messiah prophesied by Jacob (Gn 49:10–11), Zechariah (Zec 9:9), and David (Ps 8:3), and also argues against the positions of Cyril and the Jews.²⁶ This homily, written in 7+7 syllables, was rewritten in 12-syllable lines (30) with interpolations from a homily on Palm Sunday by Jacob of Serugh.²⁷

Eschatological Homilies

Gignoux identified five eschatological homilies.²⁸ *Homily 18 'On the Departed and the Resurrection'* focuses on the death and resurrection of humankind and ends with an evocation of the final coming of Christ. *Homily 34 'On Holy Week'* would be better titled *'On the End of Days'* since it focuses almost entirely on the end of days and the time of judgement.²⁹

²⁴ These five were edited and translated in F. G. McLeod, *Narsai's Metrical Homilies on the Nativity, Epiphany, Passion, Resurrection and Ascension: Critical Edition of Syriac Text* (PO 40.1; Turnhout: Brepols, 1979), with a discussion of Narsai's Christology in pages 22–29.

²⁵ McLeod, *Narsai's Metrical Homilies*, 19–22.

²⁶ The homily is summarized in J. Frishman, "Narsai's Homily for the Palm Festival — Against the Jews: For the Palm Festival or against the Jews?," *SymSyr* IV, 217–229 (220–221).

²⁷ See Frishman, "Narsai's Homily for the Palm Festival," 221.

²⁸ This collection is studied in P. Gignoux, "Les doctrines eschatologiques de Narsai," *L'Orient Syrien* 11 (1966): 321–352, 461–488; 12 (1967): 23–54.

²⁹ This proposed title is suggested by Andrew Younan, who has translated this homily for a future volume in this series.

The homily traditionally recited on the Sunday after Easter, or “New Sunday,” (44), is titled ‘*On the Renewal of Creation*’, and tells of the eschatological renewal of the earth to its paradisiacal glory.³⁰ *Homily 51 ‘On the Antichrist*’ describes Satan’s work in the last days leading up to the coming of the Antichrist, Elijah’s spiritual battle with the Antichrist in the end times — representing all humanity’s struggle with Satan and his demons, how Satan continues to fight until the second coming of Christ, and the last judgement.³¹ *Homily 52 ‘On the Second Coming*’ describes the events leading up to the glorious reappearance of Christ, including the appearance of the Antichrist, Elijah, the defeat of the Antichrist, the resurrection of the dead, the judgement, and the renewal of the world by Christ.

Old Testament Homilies

Narsai’s homilies on the Old Testament begin with a series of works that treat the Creation through to the Tower of Babel (Gn 1–11).³² The series opens with a homily on the creation of the world as presented in Genesis 1:1–25 (61), followed by homilies on the creation of man covering Genesis 1:1–2:14 (62), the disobedience of Adam and Eve covering Genesis 1:1–3:19 (63), and the murder of Abel covering Genesis 1:26–4:15 (49).³³ Jansma argues that *Homily 76 ‘On Enoch and Elijah*’, which covers Genesis 3:22–5:29, and *Homily 71 ‘On the Flood*’, which covers Genesis 1:1–9:27, continue the series both metrically and exegetically. Frishman continues the sequence further with *Homily 67 ‘On the Blessings which Noah gave his Sons*’ and *Homily 68 ‘On the Tower of Babel*’.³⁴ This sequence of homilies is the closest that Narsai comes to offering a systematic dogmatic

³⁰ Edited with a translation and extensive study in S. Joseph, “The Renewal of Creation: Theology of the Renewal and the Ultimate Realization of Paradisiacal Harmony in the Homilies of Mar Narsai of Nisibis with special reference to *memra* 44, *On the Renewal of Creation*” (PhD Diss., Salzburg, 2016).

³¹ M. Binder, “Apocalyptic Thought Written for Monks? Some Texts and Motifs and Their Function in Greek and Syriac Antiquity,” in H. Amirav, E. Grypeou, and G. G. Stroumsa (eds.), *Apocalypticism and Eschatology in Late Antiquity: Encounters in the Abrahamic Religions, 6th–8th Centuries* (LAHR 17; Louvain: Peeters, 2017), 43–74 (68–72).

³² The homilies on creation published by Gignoux (*Homélies de Narsai sur la création*) are reordered by T. Jansma (“Narsai’s Homilies on Creation: Remarks on a Recent Edition,” *Le Muséon* 83.1–2 [1970]: 209–235 [209–212]), and this list is subsequently augmented by Frishman (*Ways and Means*, III: 8–9).

³³ Jansma notes how Narsai uses recapitulation in the second through fourth homilies in this cycle, and that the homilies are sequenced in pairs, the first the 12-syllable lines, the second 7+7 syllable couplets (Jansma, “Narsai’s Homilies on Creation,” 210–211).

³⁴ Frishman argues that the logic of the sequence suggested by Jansma does not continue in the latter four homilies (*Ways and Means*, III: 9).

and exegetical commentary on scripture. Two homilies that consider God's instruction to the angels regarding the creation (63) and the governing the world (65) are transmitted with the homilies on creation in the manuscripts and the editions of the works of Narsai.

Homily 1 'On the Divine Revelations to Abraham' presents scenes from Genesis 15, 18, and 22, while *Homily 3 'On the Revelations to Abraham'* treats similar material, beginning with Abraham's call in Genesis 12 through the events of Genesis 22 with Abraham and Sarah exemplifying how God chooses a people who resist paganism with their witness of God. Narsai's *Homily 70 'On Joseph'* offers an engaging retelling of the story of Joseph as found in Genesis 37:3–36, and 39:1–46:30. *Homily 72 'On the Miracles of Moses'* treats the story of Moses from his call at the burning bush through the story of the plagues and the deliverance of Israel from Egypt (Ex 3–14). Narsai continues his story of Moses and Israel with a treatment of the construction of the tabernacle of Exodus 26 as a new creation (57), and a homily on the episode with the bronze serpent from Numbers 21 including a treatment of the typological significance (55). Narsai's *Homily 69 'On Job'* focuses on the events of Job 1:1–2:7. *Homily 73 'On Samson'* focuses on the rise and fall of the hero of Judges 13–16 as a cautionary tale.

Homily 74 'On David and Saul' is concerned with the evil inclination of Saul and, more extensively, of David, as seen especially in the episode of Uriah and his wife. Narsai's *Homily 75 'On Solomon'* focuses on Solomon's wisdom, especially as seen in the story of the two mothers found in 1 Kings 3:16–28. Elijah is dealt with briefly in *Homily 76 'On Enoch and Elijah'* mentioned above. Another homily (23) treats his life as described in 1 Kings 17–19 in more detail and ends with a discussion of his ascension to join Enoch in the Paradise of Eden. In *Homily 58 'On Isaiah's Vision'* Narsai takes the reader into the heavenly sanctuary and discusses the mysteries of the seraphim described in Isaiah 6. *Homily 77 'On Hananya and Azariah and Mishael'* dramatically recounts the story of the three young men thrown into the furnace by King Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 3. Similarly, *Homily 14 'On Jonah'* dramatically recounts the story of the prophet Jonah, taking time to explore its Christological typology.

Two homilies present a survey of Old Testament figures and episodes to illustrate a particular theme. *Homily 2 'On the Divine Revelations of Patriarchs and Prophets'* is a tour de force of God's revelations and manifestations, engaging with the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Enoch, Noah, Shem, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Job "son of Esau," Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Deborah, Jael, the wife of Manoah, Samson, David, Ahijah, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah,

Haggai, Zachariah, Malachi, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.³⁵ In *Homily 19 'On the Perfection of Works'* Narsai provides a list of those Old Testament figures whose behavior Narsai considered to be morally exemplary, featuring Abel, Enoch, Noah, Shem, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Job, Barak, Gideon, Jephthah, Samson, Samuel, David, and Solomon.³⁶

New Testament Homilies

Narsai treats three New Testament lives or figures: John the Baptist (7), Paul (8), and the Martyr Stephen (10). His homily on the four Evangelists is more concerned with their mission than their lives (9). He also treats the stories of figures whom Jesus encounters, including the raising of Lazarus (28),³⁷ the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21–28 (32),³⁸ and the thief crucified on the right hand of Jesus (37). Narsai's other New Testament homilies focus on the parables and include homilies '*On the Parable of the Ten Virgins*' (27), '*On the Prodigal Son*' (33), '*On the Workers in the Vineyard*' (47), '*On the Rich Man and Lazarus*' (48), and '*On the Wheat and the Tares*' (53). The latter begins with an interpretation of the parable, then briefly considers examples of tares who changed to wheat (e.g., Abraham) and of wheat who became tares (e.g., Bardaisan), and then becomes an extended diatribe against the tares (heretics such as Marcion, Mani, Paul of Samosata, Valentinus, Arius, etc.), and Satan, the sower of tares.

Rebuke Homilies and Moral Formation

Adam Becker has identified a series of rebuke homilies by Narsai.³⁹ These include homilies on human weakness (15), which is thought by Frishman to be spurious;⁴⁰ on

³⁵ Extensive summary in D. E. George, "Narsai's Homilies on the Old Testament as a Source for His Exegesis" (PhD Diss., Dropsie University, Philadelphia, 1972), 162–193. Narsai also discusses the ministries of the angels Michael and Gabriel.

³⁶ I take this list from Frishman's succinct review of the second portion of the homily (*Ways and Means*, III: 24–26).

³⁷ The homily is summarized in Frishman, "Narsai's Homily for the Palm Festival," 220.

³⁸ Translated by E. G. Walsh in J. E. Walters (ed.), *Eastern Christianity: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021), 69–87.

³⁹ For a discussion of the Lenten homilies of Narsai as rebuke texts, see A. H. Becker, "The 'Evil Inclination' of the Jews: The Syriac *Yatsra* in Narsai's Metrical Homilies for Lent," *JQR* 106.2 (2016): 179–207.

⁴⁰ See footnote 21 above.

fasting, with examples from Moses, Elijah, Daniel, and Christ (20); on humility and good works in the face of the vanity of life (24); on the declining state of the world, including the behavior of priests (25); on the consequences of jealousy, with examples from the Fall, Cain and Abel, Joseph, Jacob, and Job (26); on the reproof of priests in Narsai's day (78); and on humanity in the battlefield of life (79).

Most of Narsai's homilies aim to help the audience in their moral formation, especially by holding up to them the mirror of exemplary lives.⁴¹ Narsai's *Homily 12 'On the Evil of the Time'* despairs at the recalcitrance of human iniquity; *Homily 13 'On Supplication'* contrasts humanity's weakness with God's boundless grace. *Homily 16 'On Human Nature'* compares the promise of humankind created in the image of God with their wretchedness and weakness, and it seeks aid and grace from God. Narsai devoted two homilies to the temptation of Christ (21, 22). In the first, the temptation is prompted by the outpouring of holiness surrounding the incarnation. In the second, the devil tempts Jesus because of the announcement that he is God's beloved son. In both, it is Jesus's humanity that is tempted, and Narsai rejects those who would attribute suffering to his divinity. In *Homily 50 'On Humility'*, Narsai extols the humility of Christ, which was also evident in the lives of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses. By contrast, the devil overcame Cain, Ham, Esau, and Pharaoh (etc.) because of pride. Narsai's *Homily 80 'On Reproof of the Daughters of Eve'* is a harsh invective against the evils perpetrated by women in the scriptures meant as a warning and reproof to contemporary women. He ends with an appeal to freewill, admonishing women that they can choose instead to be like Sarah, Rebekah, and Hannah.

Other Homilies

Narsai's *Homily 11 'On the Three Doctors'* is a defense of the doctrine of the Greek fathers Diodore, Theodore, and Nestorius against the attacks of Cyril of Alexandria. *Homily 17 'For Any Saints Day'* is filled with praise for the Saints — discussing how they are called from all walks of life, their victorious works, and their rewards, and ends with praise for the saint attached to a particular community. Narsai's *Homily 31 'Against the Jews'* is an anti-Jewish polemic that uses Old Testament witness to contend against the privilege of the election of the people (the Jews) and to argue in favor of the peoples (the

⁴¹ K. S. Heal, "Narsai and the Scriptural Self," in Butts, Heal, and Kitchen (eds.), *Narsai: Rethinking His Work and His World*, 133–143.

gentile converts to Christianity) and for Jesus as the promised Messiah. *Homily 43 'On the Martyrs'*, thought to be spuriously attributed, extols the glory of the martyrs and their deaths as a testimony of another world. *Homily 54 'On the Feast of the Find of the True Cross'* contrasts the saving work of the crucifixion of Christ with the scorn he received from the Jewish and Pagan world, compares the work of Christ with the failure of other world religions, points to Old Testament types of the crucifixion, and praises the work of the cross in Christianity, including the victory of Constantine. *Homily 60 'On the Dedication of the Church'*, thought to be spurious, argues that Jesus became betrothed to the Church on the cross based on testimony from the Old Testament prophets, the apostles, the doctors of the church, and the martyrs. Narsai's homily *Homily 66 'On the Soul'* is a deep and beautiful meditation on the human soul.⁴²

What is clear from this survey is how important the Old Testament was in Narsai's teaching. Not only did he devote more homilies to Old Testament themes than any other, but he also frequently draws on Old Testament figures to illustrate virtues and vices. Why this is the case becomes clearer as we consider Narsai's influences and his activities.

The Heir of Edessa and Antioch

One of the principal debates in Narsai studies in the twentieth century was over Narsai's intellectual heritage: was he the heir of Ephrem or of Antioch? The answer is both.⁴³ As Jansma evocatively observes, when one listens to the homilies of Narsai, one's "ear catches the sounds of two voices speaking in turn, in a dialogue of principles, partly opposite to each other, partly complementary."⁴⁴ Narsai was exceptionally well-read in his native tradition, so much so that his purported bookishness has the ring of truth. It seems quite plausible that when he fled from Edessa in the face of increased persecution, he asked some Persian "if it were possible to take his books with them (when they returned to Nisibis). For this was his whole treasure."⁴⁵ Moreover, Narsai would have

⁴² J. E. Walters, "Where Soul Meets Body: Narsai's Depiction of the Soul-Body Relationship in Context," in Butts, Heal, and Kitchen (eds.), *Narsai: Rethinking His Work and His World*, 227–253.

⁴³ Butts, "Narsai's Life and Works," 3–4, with extensive bibliographical references documenting the positions and the debate.

⁴⁴ Jansma, "Narsai's Homilies on Creation," 235.

⁴⁵ Nau, *L'histoire*, 603; Becker, *Sources*, 61. A significant number of books survive from the fifth century, and so we have some idea of what Narsai's library might have looked like. For early dated manuscripts, see

been heir to the so-called “tradition of the school.” The *Cause of the Foundation of the Schools* records specifically that it was the “tradition of the school,” that is, the “things that were transmitted from mouth to ear of old” that “the blessed Mar Narsai mixed . . . into his homilies and the rest of his writings.”⁴⁶ Despite the possible polemical intent of this passage, aimed to show that Narsai is the true heir of the Syriac tradition, scholarship has shown this statement to be largely true. A careful reading of Narsai should certainly be done with one ear listening to the tradition, as far as it has survived in earlier Syriac authors — above all Ephrem and the corpus of anonymous narrative poems on biblical themes.⁴⁷

Both historical sources and the manuscripts attest to a vibrant translation movement in fifth-century Edessa. During Narsai’s formation and his early years of teaching at the School of Edessa, the intellectually potent works of Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428) appeared in Syriac for the first time.⁴⁸ Theodore became “the Exegete” *par excellence* in the East Syriac tradition, the great representative of Antiochene exegesis. What “characterizes the entire Antiochene mental world” and appears to have appealed to Narsai was “the fundamental insight that this world, its history, and its inhabitants are important in their own right and reveal God by acting as *Realsymbole*, not as shadows which serve to allegorize timeless realities.”⁴⁹ Allegory is not found in the works of Narsai (though typology is).⁵⁰ Instead, biblical figures, whose stories Narsai explored so thoroughly, are presented as true guides and real companions to contemporary Christians.⁵¹

S. P. Brock, “A Tentative Checklist of Dated Syriac Manuscripts up to 1300,” *Hugoye* 15.1 (2012): 21–48. For an insight into Syriac manuscript cultures, see K. S. Heal, “Catalogues and the Poetics of Syriac Manuscript Cultures,” *Hugoye* 20.2 (2017): 375–417.

⁴⁶ Scher, *Cause*, 382; Becker, *Sources*, 151.

⁴⁷ Ephrem’s influence is established in T. Jansma, “Narsai and Ephraem: Some Observations on Narsai’s Homilies on Creation and Ephraem’s Hymns on Faith,” *Parole de l’Orient* 1 (1970): 49–68.

⁴⁸ On the reception of Theodore in the School of Nisibis, see Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom*, 113–125.

⁴⁹ R. Murray, “Review of Christian Antioch: A Study of Early Christian Thought in the East by D. S. Wallace-Hadrill,” *JTS* 35.1 (1984): 235.

⁵⁰ For a concise description of Narsai’s exegetical method, see L. Van Rompay, “The Christian Syriac Tradition of Interpretation,” in M. Sæbø (ed.), *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: The History of Interpretation*, Vol. 1. *From the Beginnings to the Middle Ages (Until 1300)*, Part 1. *Antiquity* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 612–641. For more detailed discussion of six Old Testament homilies, see the third part of Frishman, *Ways and Means*.

⁵¹ More could be said about Narsai’s intellectual heritage, including his debt to his upbringing in Persian (Zoroastrian) territory. See, for example, S. Minov, “‘Serpentine’ Eve in Syriac Christian Literature of Late Antiquity,” in D. V. Arbel and A. A. Orlov (eds.), *With Letters of Light: Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls*,

Narsai is also concerned with the narrativity of biblical stories. He is happy to deploy biblical figures as exemplars in a way that places him in line with the fourth-century Syriac homilist Aphrahat, but he is much more concerned than Aphrahat to retell the stories. This is particularly evident in quintessential Old Testament narratives, such as those of Jonah (14) and Joseph (70). Like the Antiochenes, he respected “the sequence of the story and the coherence of the narrative, both with itself and with the rest of scripture.”⁵² He let himself be guided by the narrative in a way that we see elsewhere in Syriac literature most prominently in Syriac narrative poetry. In his homily on Joseph, for example, he takes up the theme of inter-generational instruction in the elaborate proem, but when it comes to tackling the life of Joseph, like the Antiochenes, he seems “basically interested in the narrative logic of particular stories.”⁵³ This Antiochene influence seems to have ensured that Narsai was an heir to the narrative and didactic modes of the Syriac poetic tradition and not just the symbolic theology and rhetoric of the lyric poetry of Ephrem, which was continued more actively by Jacob of Serugh and Isaac.⁵⁴

In the *Ecclesiastical History* attributed to Barḥadbshabba, Narsai’s attachment to the thought of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Nestorius is the basis for accusations of heresy. Their characterization of Narsai may, however, be correct: “He meditates upon their writings and speaks their traditions.”⁵⁵ Narsai’s homilies certainly seem to be the result of deep reflection and careful domestication of the work of “the exegete.” As a result, there is, as Adam Becker has noticed, an “agency and creativity in this process of reception.”⁵⁶ Reading Narsai demands recognizing both the Antiochene traditions and the agency at play. His own works confirm the influence. Referring to Theodore, Narsai observes, “‘Doctor doctorum’ the sharp-witted deserves to be called. But for him, no teacher would

Early Jewish Apocalypticism, Magic, and Mysticism in Honor of Rachel Elior (Ekstasis 2; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 92–114 (111–112). Note also how Narsai is referred to as one “of our own Persian fathers” in Barḥadbshabba’s *Ecclesiastical History*, Chapter 31 (Becker, *Sources*, 47). The Sasanian context of Narsai is explored in an unpublished dissertation: S. W. Sunquist, “Narsai and the Persians: A Study in Cultural Contact and Conflict” (PhD Diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1990), which now must be read in light of J. W. Childers, “In Search of Jesus: Performative Christology in Narsai’s *Mēmre* on Baptism,” in Butts, Heal, and Kitchen (eds.), *Narsai: Rethinking His Work and His World*, 69–91.

⁵² F. M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 164.

⁵³ F. M. Young, “Interpretation of Scripture,” in S. A. and D. G. Hunter (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 854.

⁵⁴ For an overview of Syriac narrative poetry, see the introduction of K. S. Heal, *Genesis 37 and 39 in the Early Syriac Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2023).

⁵⁵ Nau, *L’histoire*, 600; Becker, *Sources*, 58.

⁵⁶ Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom*, 125.

teach correctly ... His thought was a guide for me to Scriptures. He elevated me to the correct understanding of the Writings of the Spirit.”⁵⁷ When we recognize Narsai’s double heritage, reading Narsai becomes a compelling experience. Jansma captures well this sense of how recognizing Narsai’s double heritage reveals a complex and compelling author, and sets in relief a body of work that is essential to understanding the intellectual struggles of the fifth century:

In my view this Syrian by birth and from choice, whose education at the grecianized Academy of Edessa has left its indelible mark upon his mind, is the recipient of a double heritage. Narsai’s discourses, when interpreted solely in terms of Theodorean exegesis and theology, cannot but impress us as flat and dull and uninspiring. Once they have been perceived as the reflections of a struggle with a double loyalty, the well-balanced equilibrium of whose rhetorical structure cannot conceal their immense inner tension, they become extraordinarily interesting: a fifth-century paradigm on East Syrian soil of the interaction of two clashing cultures.⁵⁸

Poet, Teacher, and Exegete

Perhaps Narsai’s indebtedness to his native tradition is seen nowhere more than in the fact that he composed his works in verse. He was a poet-exegete, or poet-theologian. Narsai is frequently seen by modern scholars as being a lesser poet, compared with Ephrem and Jacob of Serugh. However, in his own tradition, he is called “the tongue of the East” in the tenth-century *Chronicle of Seert*, and “the harp of the spirit” in the fourteenth-century *Catalogue of Books* by ‘Abdisho bar Brikha (d. 1318).⁵⁹ As Jansma has noted, “Narsai’s homilies are carefully crafted compositions.”⁶⁰ They are most frequently formed with a clear proem that deals with a main issue of the homily, a well-crafted body that often returns to major themes or key terms, and a conclusion. Narsai is a “sophisticated master of stylistic techniques.”⁶¹ His style is engaging. He asks questions, deploys

⁵⁷ This passage from Narsai’s homily *Homily 11 ‘On the Three Doctors’* is translated in Jansma, “Narsai’s Homilies on Creation,” 225. Jansma goes on to note that, “It seems not too bold to me, to assume that Narsai, the first rector of the Academy of Nisibis, has been instrumental in the canonization of Theodore of Mopsuestia as the supreme authority of the East Syrian Church in matters of exegesis and theology” (226).

⁵⁸ Jansma, “Narsai’s Homilies on Creation,” 235.

⁵⁹ Butts, “Narsai’s Life and Work,” 1, with references to the sources.

⁶⁰ Jansma, “Narsai’s Homilies on Creation,” 215.

⁶¹ Jansma, “Narsai’s Homilies on Creation,” 217.

exemplars, utilizes contrasts for rhetorical effect, adds imagined speech, and uses other rhetorical tools, such as repetition and play on words.⁶² Much of this is, unfortunately, obscured in translations.

Narsai certainly had faith in poetry as a productive and effective medium of theological and exegetical discourse. One could not say, however, that he had the soul of a poet. Rather, he had the soul of an educator, one who believed that human salvation was dependent both on a person's capacity to be educated and on the effectiveness of their teachers. Education in the school of Nisibis, and therefore perhaps the School of the Persians in Edessa, was characterized by "the sociality of study."⁶³ As Adam Becker notes, "Students at the school studied together and, as the canons attest, lived together."⁶⁴ Literacy, based on the Psalter and the Liturgy, led to deeper reading and study of the Old and New Testament, and finally to interpretation.⁶⁵ When Narsai arrived at the school of Edessa it was said to be "flourishing with spiritual intercourse and instruction in the scriptures."⁶⁶ It was precisely this sort of lively intellectual life that we see reflected in Narsai's deeply evocative and allusive homilies. Narsai's appointment as the head of the school was said to have been unanimously welcomed "not only because of his old age, his success, his work, and the elegance of his speech, but also because of his perfect and divine manner of life and his condescension towards everyone."⁶⁷ Despite their clear rhetorical performance, there is a genuineness to Narsai's self-effacing prologues that suggests some truth to this praise.

Narsai, like Ephrem, belongs to that class of great teachers and preachers who were not bishops (unlike Jacob of Serugh, for example).⁶⁸ And we sense in Narsai's biography a latent tension between the independence of the schools and the authority of the bishops. Perhaps this was because for Narsai, the teacher was acting not simply within an ecclesiastical context, but also within the context of a theology of divine pedagogy.⁶⁹ As Frances

⁶² Narsai's prosody is explored in P. M. Forness, "The Construction of Metrical Poetry in the Homilies of Narsai of Nisibis and Jacob of Serugh," in Butts, Heal, and Kitchen (eds.), *Narsai: Rethinking His Work and His World*, 93–115.

⁶³ Becker, *Sources*, 8.

⁶⁴ Becker, *Sources*, 8–9.

⁶⁵ Becker, *Sources*, 9.

⁶⁶ Nau, *L'histoire*, 596; Becker, *Sources*, 55.

⁶⁷ Nau, *L'histoire*, 599; Becker, *Sources*, 57.

⁶⁸ F. Young, "Towards a Christian *paideia*," in M. Mitchell and F. Young (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Christianity: Origins to Constantine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 485–500.

⁶⁹ Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom*, 22–40.

Young observed, for the Antiochenes, “The primary function of holy scripture is educational, an assumption adopted unquestioningly from the ancient view of literature as the core of the curriculum.”⁷⁰ Moreover, the entire divine economy is viewed in educational terms. God is a teacher in Narsai’s theological vision.⁷¹

What Narsai taught was biblical exegesis. As head of the school, Narsai was “the exegete,” the same title that was given to Theodore.⁷² We can see “the exegete” at work in his homilies. In fact, it may not be inappropriate to consider Narsai’s homilies as commentaries. Coakley argues, for example, that a Narsai homily “often follows the biblical text closely, and in its expression it can be so didactic, or even argumentative, that it practically counts as prose commentary.”⁷³ Compared with his younger contemporary, Jacob of Serugh, this makes Narsai “exegetically and doctrinally the more precise, but poetically poorer for being restrained by rules of exegesis that inhibit the use of symbols and types.”⁷⁴

Exegesis was not simply an investigative activity, but also a meditative one. The emphasis given to “meditation on the liturgy and meditation on the scriptures” seems borne out by Narsai’s exegesis of both ritual and scripture.⁷⁵ Narsai circles questions, coming at them from different perspectives. His engagement with the Bible is based on a close reading of the text, but is also part of a layered religious discourse, the kind of discourse that Sidney Griffith described as a “contemplative exercise in poetically exploring the inner resonances of revelation’s inexhaustible spring of many meanings.”⁷⁶ Thus, it is often difficult, as Gignoux has already noted, to separate Narsai’s exegesis from his theology because they are “so intimately mixed.”⁷⁷

Narsai is also capable of mixed modes of exegesis. This is seen clearly in his series of homilies that treat the opening chapters of Genesis. The series is organized in pairs, with the first homily in 12-syllable lines, and the second in 7+7 syllable couplets. As Jansma

⁷⁰ Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture*, 173.

⁷¹ S. P. Brock, “God as the Educator of Humanity: Some Voices from the Syriac Tradition,” in G. J. Brooke and R. Smithuis (eds.), *Jewish Education from Antiquity to the Middle Ages: Studies in Honour of Philip S. Alexander* (AJEC 100; Leiden: Brill, 2017), 236–251 (241).

⁷² Becker, *Sources*, 9.

⁷³ J. F. Coakley, “Syriac Exegesis,” in J. C. Paget and J. Schaper (eds.), *The New Cambridge History of the Bible*, Volume 1. *From the Beginnings to 600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 697–713 (708).

⁷⁴ Coakley, “Syriac Exegesis,” 711.

⁷⁵ Nau, *L’histoire*, 611; Becker, *Sources*, 68.

⁷⁶ S. H. Griffith, “The Poetics of Scriptural Reasoning: Syriac Mēm̄rê at Work,” in J. Wickes and K. S. Heal (eds.), *Literature, Rhetoric, and Exegesis in Syriac Verse* (SP 78; Louvain: Peeters, 2017), 5–24 (6).

⁷⁷ Gignoux, *Homélies de Narsai*, 427.

notes, “The second of each pair differ from the first in that their line is longer and their pace more leisurely. Over against the first which in some respects resemble a dogmatic treatise, they are spoken on the calmer tone of a paraphrase of Holy Scripture.”⁷⁸

It is also clear that exegesis was a poetic activity linked by a common inspiration. Scriptural pericopes, Narsai says, “are like a flash of light.”⁷⁹ But this inspiration also extended to the form of the exegetical homily. Speaking of the first homily in the cycle on Creation, for example, Jansma observed that “this discourse is a meticulously composed hymn on Cosmic Order and Divine Government, in the form of a homily based on the first chapter of Genesis, in which exegesis and dogmatics are inextricably interwoven.”⁸⁰ Sometimes the poetry becomes so entwined with the exegesis that passages can appear opaque. This combination of syntax, style, and concision needs to be unpacked. “The only way to grasp the meaning of these cryptic passages,” said Jansma, “is to study the stylistic devices which are involved, to consult parallel sections in the other homilies and to investigate the sources of Narsai’s exposition of Scripture.”⁸¹

Conversation and Conflict

Narsai’s homilies are directed primarily to the concerns of his immediate audience.⁸² Narsai most likely “stood alone in [his] interactions with the assemblies [he] addressed.”⁸³ If he spoke before a public audience, or in a liturgical context, it would seem likely that the Syriac-speaking audience responded interactively, in a similar way to the Greek-speaking audiences to the west of Edessa and Nisibis.⁸⁴ These responses (clapping, waving,

⁷⁸ Jansma, “Narsai’s Homilies on Creation,” 212.

⁷⁹ Narsai, *Mēmṛā 27 ‘On the Parable of the Ten Virgins’*, 7 (ed. Mingana 1.244.2–3).

⁸⁰ Jansma, “Narsai’s Homilies on Creation,” 216.

⁸¹ Jansma, “Narsai’s Homilies on Creation,” 217. Jansma uses this approach to generate an extensive list of improved renderings of Gignoux’s translation (217–224).

⁸² The *Ecclesiastical History* suggests that Narsai also wrote *mēmṛē* responding to contemporary political issues (Nau, *L’histoire*, 612–613; Becker, *Sources*, 70–71).

⁸³ Griffith, “Poetics of Scriptural Reasoning,” 18.

⁸⁴ As described, for example, in M. W. Elliott, “Exegetical Genres in the Patristic Era,” in J. C. Paget and J. Schaper (eds.), *The New Cambridge History of the Bible*, Vol. 1. *From the Beginnings to 600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 775–797 (782). In his homily *On the Penitent Thief*, Jacob of Serugh describes some varied audience reactions to his sermons. The relevant passage is cited in P. Brown, “The End of the Ancient Other World: Death and Afterlife between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages,” *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* 20 (1999): 21–85 (51).

exclamations) were spontaneous, and it seems unlikely that the audience was “bidden [even] on occasion to respond to the verses of the memre with a set antiphonal phrase” as they did in the later tradition.⁸⁵

Apart from the little that can be teased out regarding Narsai’s engagement with his audience, it is clear that he was frequently in conversation with contemporary and earlier authors. Most famously, in the tradition of the East Syriac schools, Narsai is said to have begun writing in the verse homily (*mēm̄rā*) genre in reaction to (or to be in conversation with) his younger contemporary, Jacob of Serugh (d. 521):

Jacob of Sarug, who was eloquent for evil and joined closely to heresy, began to compose his heresy and error hypocritically by the way of the *mēm̄rē*, which he composed, since through the pleasant composition of enticing sounds he drew the bulk of the people from the glorious one. What then did the elect of God do? He did not even ignore this, but according to the word of the psalmist he did what he said: With the chosen you have been chosen and with the perverse you have been crooked. But he set down the true opinion of orthodoxy in the manner of *mēm̄rē*, fitted upon sweet tones. He combined the meaning of the scriptures according to the opinion of the holy fathers in pleasant antiphons in the likeness of the blessed David.⁸⁶

Narsai’s relationship with Jacob has been variously construed (teacher-student, theological adversary). Even though there is no evidence that they ever even met, their works “share a number of themes, motifs, and approaches, which must reflect their common Edessene background.”⁸⁷ Narsai does not mention Jacob by name in his homilies as he does with other (most historical) adversaries.⁸⁸ For example, Narsai responds to Cyril of Alexandria and Eutyches in *On the Nativity*, and to their heirs in *On the Epiphany*.

⁸⁵ Griffith (“Poetics of Scriptural Reasoning,” 18 esp. fn. 39) argues on the basis of the late liturgical manuscripts of Narsai’s works for the existence of antiphonal responses in Narsai’s day, against Becker, who says that “antiphons ... do not belong to the *mēm̄rā* genre” (Becker, *Sources*, 69 fn. 160). I agree with Becker.

⁸⁶ The story is found in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Barḥadbshabba (Becker, *Sources*, 69). Note the similarity to the origin story of Ephrem’s poetic turn, discussed in Griffith “Poetics of Scriptural Reasoning,” 9–10.

⁸⁷ Van Rompay, “Narsai,” 304, with more detail in idem, “Syria II (Syrische Literatur),” *RAC*, section E.2.

⁸⁸ This is in contrast with Jacob who often leaves his Christian theological adversaries unnamed, at least on the surface. See, for instance, Butts’ argument that at least some of Jacob’s polemic against dyophysites, whether Chalcedonian or not, is framed as anti-Jewish polemic (unpublished lecture, “A New Look at the Anti-Judaism of Jacob of Serugh [d. 521],” September 15, 2021, available online at <https://thehiddenpearl.org/jacobofserugh/lecturers/aaron-butts/>).

He responds specifically to Eutyches in *On the Passion*. In *On the Resurrection*, he calls adversaries “Lovers of death” and “heretics.” While in *On the Ascension* he refers to his opponents only in general terms.⁸⁹ However, rather than arguing against the ideas of Eutyches, it seems more likely that Narsai is using Eutyches as a foil to refute the arguments of unnamed Miaphysite contemporaries, such as Severus, Jacob of Serugh, and Philoxenus.

Narsai’s internecine polemics have also been the subject of speculation. *Homily 12* ‘*On the Evil of the Time*’ and *Homily 80* ‘*On Reproof of Women*’ are specifically connected in the *Ecclesiastical History* to a conflict between Narsai and Bishop Barsauma’s wife shortly after he arrived in Nisibis.⁹⁰ The biographical setting for these two homilies has been accepted by most scholars, but not all.⁹¹ Homilies were certainly used in Late Antiquity to contend with specific individuals or groups, and so readers need to be alert to the possibility of historicizing these works. However, caution is also necessary. A hermeneutic of suspicion can allow for connection while keeping the reader open to other possibilities, or simply to the possibility that precise historicization is simply impossible for most Syriac homilies that survive from the ancient world.⁹²

Narsai was also concerned about contending with those outside the Christian community. This may have simply been a function of his training. As Adam Becker usefully observes, “The titles of other texts mentioned in the sources [of the School of Nisibis] yet no longer extant suggest that students were also introduced to theological polemic and debate thus preparing them for proselytising and disputing with Zoroastrians, Jews, and heterodox Christians.”⁹³ Anti-Jewish polemic is as pervasive as the anti-miaphysite polemic. Narsai’s *Homily 31* ‘*Against the Jews*’ is a prime example.⁹⁴ *Homily 54* ‘*On the Feast of the Finding of the True Cross*’ also contains anti-Jewish polemic but combines this

⁸⁹ McLeod, *Narsai’s Metrical Homilies*, 19–20.

⁹⁰ Nau, *L’histoire*, 608–611; Becker, *Sources*, 66–68.

⁹¹ Gerö, *Baršauma of Nisibis*, 68–70; C. Molenberg, “Narsai’s Memra on the Reproof of Eve’s Daughters and the ‘Tricks and Devices’ They Perform,” *Le Muséon* 106 (1993): 65–87 (66); Minov, “‘Serpentine’ Eve in Syriac Christian Literature of Late Antiquity,” 110. Becker dissents, raising the possibility that Narsai’s biography may have been invented or adapted at this point to establish an historical setting for these two *mēmre* (Becker, *Sources*, 67 fn. 147), and Butts agrees with Becker (“Narsai’s Life and Works,” 3 fn. 10).

⁹² Forness has made important strides in historicizing some of Jacob of Serugh’s homilies in P. M. Forness, *Preaching Christology in the Roman Near East: A Study of Jacob of Serugh* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁹³ Becker, *Sources*, 10.

⁹⁴ Frishman, “Narsai’s Homily for the Palm Festival.”

with diatribes against Greco-Roman paganism and other religions of the late antique Near East.⁹⁵ Narsai worked in a fraught cosmopolitan marketplace of ideas and was always determined to defend and advocate for his particular spiritual world view.

Transmission and Reception

Narsai is the earliest Syriac author whose name and works were continually transmitted by posterity. Complete texts of earlier authors such as Bardaisan, Aphrahat, Ephrem and Cyrillona, only survive because of the preservation of some very ancient manuscript at Deir el-Surian.⁹⁶ But no ancient manuscripts of Narsai's works survive as they do for several of his contemporaries and predecessors.⁹⁷ The earliest surviving manuscript of Narsai's works, Diyarbakır 70 (= Da) is dated to 1328, meaning that the manuscript tradition for Narsai is only seven centuries old.⁹⁸ Or, to put it another way, more than eight centuries separate Narsai from the earliest surviving manuscript. We are therefore left to guess what the earliest transmission history would have been. It seems likely that the earliest collections would have been thematic, and directed to a school or study setting, as we find with the early manuscripts of Jacob of Serugh.⁹⁹ However, during the course of transmission, Narsai's homilies were "gathered together in collections intended for liturgical use."¹⁰⁰ This means that the liturgical and other paratexts that you will encounter (titles, responses, etc.) are in all likelihood entirely secondary to Narsai, and thus valuable only for the study of the reception of Narsai.¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ K. E. Bryant Gibson, "An Early Syriac *Apologia Crucis*: *Mēmra* 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross,'" in Butts, Heal, and Kitchen (eds.), *Narsai: Rethinking His Work and His World*, 117–132.

⁹⁶ S. P. Brock, "Without Mushê of Nisibis, Where Would We Be? Some Reflections on the Transmission of Syriac Literature," *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 56.1–4 (2004): 15–24. On the contents and dispersal of the library of Deir el-Surian, see Heal, "Catalogues and the Poetics of Syriac Manuscript Cultures."

⁹⁷ For the earliest East Syriac manuscripts, see S. P. Brock, "Early Dated Manuscripts of the Church of the East, 7th–13th Century," *JAAS* 21 (2007): 8–34.

⁹⁸ See Butts, Heal, and Brock, *Clavis to the Metrical Homilies of Narsai*, 83–86.

⁹⁹ Forness, *Preaching Christology*, 50–51.

¹⁰⁰ Van Rompay, "Narsai," 304. For the excerpts found in recent liturgical books, see McLeod, *Narsai's Metrical Homilies*, 9 fn. 18.

¹⁰¹ Butts suggests that scribal activity starting in Alqosh in the late seventeenth century may even be responsible not only for "transmitting and preserving" the Narsai corpus, "but also in shaping and — arguably — even in creating it" (A. M. Butts, "A Misapplication of *Eliminatio Codicum Descriptorum* in the

There is clear evidence that Narsai was actively read by later authors in the Church of the East.¹⁰² Timothy I mentions and quotes him in his letters.¹⁰³ Isho'dad of Merv often relies on him in his own commentaries.¹⁰⁴ Emmanuel bar Shahhare took Narsai as a model, and one of Narsai's homilies (81) was also transmitted among Emmanuel's works.¹⁰⁵ And the thirteenth-century poet Gewargis Warda draws significantly from Narsai in his collection of poems.¹⁰⁶ The newly identified *Homily 82* is an example of a genuine homily transmitted under another name.¹⁰⁷ More frequent are the spurious homilies that are transmitted beside the genuine works. This means that before attributing a particular idea to Narsai, it is important to consider the authenticity of the homily and the possibility of interpolation.

Narsai was only really discovered in European scholarship in the twentieth century. The first thirty-eight homilies to be published appear in Mingana's fine two-volume 1905 edition.¹⁰⁸ Two recent facsimile publications augment the printed texts: Three additional homilies are included in the volume on the gospel parables published by Siman, reproduced from Teheran Neesan 1,¹⁰⁹ and a reproduction of a 1902 collection of 76 *mēmre*¹¹⁰ makes an additional fourteen previously unpublished homilies available.¹¹¹ This leaves only three undisputed *mēmre* (17, 32, 51) which do not appear in any published form,¹¹²

Manuscript Tradition of Narsai [d. c.500],” *Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies Bulletin* 5.2 [2019]: 77–100, citing fn. 77).

¹⁰² Van Rompay, “Narsai,” 304.

¹⁰³ Van Rompay, “Narsai,” 304; Butts, “Narsai's Life and Works,” 5.

¹⁰⁴ Van Rompay, “Narsai,” 304; Butts, “Narsai's Life and Works,” 5–6.

¹⁰⁵ Van Rompay, “Narsai,” 304; Butts, “Narsai's Life and Works,” 6.

¹⁰⁶ Butts, “Narsai's Life and Works,” 6.

¹⁰⁷ A. M. Butts, “Reclaiming Narsai's *Mēmre* of the Feast of the Victorious Cross,” *Hugoye* 23.1 (2020): 3–30.

¹⁰⁸ This edition has been the mainstay of Narsai scholarship for over a century. There are, however, some problems with the edition, among which is the fact that the manuscript basis is not clear (on which see Connolly, *Liturgical Homilies*, xi–xii; and more recently, Jansma, “Narsai's Homilies on Creation,” 213). Perhaps the more serious flaw stems from Mingana's tendency to excoriate or modify unacceptable passages, on which see Connolly, *Liturgical Homilies*, 5 fn. 1, 14 fn. 1, 20 fn. 1.

¹⁰⁹ *Narsai: Cinq homélies*. Homilies 33, 47, 53; 27 and 48 were previously published by Mingana.

¹¹⁰ Includes the four *mēmre* on Joseph attributed to Narsai, and five of the six disputed *mēmre* (43 excepted) as well as various *soḡyātā* (for full description, see Butts, Heal, and Brock, *Clavis to the Metrical Homilies of Narsai*, 143–146).

¹¹¹ Homilies 5, 7, 9, 18, 19, 21, 22, 28, 29, 50, 56, 74, 75, 81.

¹¹² An edition and translation of *Homily 32 'On the Canaanite Woman'* is included in E. G. Walsh, “Sanctifying Boldness: New Testament Women in Narsai, Jacob of Serugh, and Romanos Melodos” (PhD diss., Duke University, 2019). Walsh has since published a version of this translation in Walters, *Eastern Christianity: A Reader*, 69–87.

though each of these texts is available in one or more manuscripts in western collections.¹¹³ For readers of Narsai in Syriac, this means that the difficult work of establishing the best text of Narsai has yet to be done for most of the corpus.

Conclusion

Narsai was, until recently, a neglected figure in Syriac studies.¹¹⁴ The recent publication of a collection of new essays, and a comprehensive *clavis*, together with important works, are cumulatively bringing Narsai, his work, and his world out of obscurity.¹¹⁵ What is clearly needed now is more work in translation, so that a greater variety of scholars, working in the diverse disciplines that are attracted to his late antique world, can take his contributions into account in re-describing and re-engaging with fifth-century Mesopotamia.

The translations contained in this volume — and, indeed, this series — aim to fill that need. The translations are based on the best available editions and, where necessary, incorporate preferred readings from other manuscript witnesses. For the unedited works, the best manuscript has been selected as the basis for the translation, with other manuscript readings incorporated as seem necessary to the translator. The diverse collection of Narsai's homilies in this volume showcase his breadth, not only of topic, but also tone.

¹¹³ The manuscript sources for Narsai's homilies are conveniently gathered in Butts, Heal, and Brock, *Clavis to the Metrical Homilies of Narsai*.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Brock, "Published Verse Homilies," 279.

¹¹⁵ Butts, Heal, and Kitchen (eds.), *Narsai: Rethinking his Work and his World* and Butts, Heal, and Brock, *Clavis to the Metrical Homilies of Narsai*.

HOMILY 1
'ON REVELATIONS TO PATRIARCHS AND PROPHETS (I)'

Introduced by
Robert A. KITCHEN

Translated by
Sidney H. GRIFFITH

Narsai begins this homily by musing about returning to an engaged and persistent reading of the scriptures, fighting the wiles of Satan who attempts to discourage him through weariness, distractions, and physical passions. Learning is personified and calls to Narsai to shrug off sleep and listen to the voice of the Spirit's scripture. At the conclusion of the homily, Narsai returns to his practice of reading and interpretation of scripture. He does not simply repeat the words, nor make up their meanings. He has learned how to interpret truthfully after being an apprentice of the Spirit's books, like a tradesman, at which he has labored in study all his life.

The three revelations to Abraham are revisited: the sacrifice of birds and animals in Genesis 15, the three visitors to Abraham in Genesis 18, and the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22. Narsai examines the particulars of each revelation and then probes their meaning in succession. He admits he has read the words, but now he seeks the meaning of it all.

The eerie task for Abraham to sacrifice the animals at God's command and then wait for divine revelation is explained by Narsai. The three animals are symbolic, signifying the eventual redemption of Israel from slavery in Egypt.

Three is the number again as three spiritual beings visit Abraham and Sarah in the desert. Narsai indicates that they show Abraham "how a human can be God." Only a small step is needed by Narsai to make the transition to the Word and Christ. God instructs Abraham in how to see "the hidden in the manifest," although one never sees God's nature or essence. One does not see God as a finite fact, but in a vision, via

a mystery (*rāzā*). This is exemplified most readily and mysteriously in the three spiritual beings who impossibly appear to eat real food.

The third revelation begins with the dilemma of Sarah and Abraham, spiritually dead in the barrenness of the body (its unfruitfulness), and so similar to the death of Adam and Eve upon eating the fruit of the tree. Abraham hears the good news of the resurrection of all people in the declaration to him, “Your wife Sarah will have a child.” Narsai leaps ahead to the sacrifice of Isaac, in which the hidden, mysterious, and unspeakable all inexplicably merge. It is the mystery of the Messiah, one sacrifice to match the other, albeit Isaac’s sacrifice was waived at the last moment. Narsai voices God’s rationale that while this is the type for Christ’s sacrifice, Isaac’s death would not have been effective for humanity, so humanity had to wait for the salvific sacrifice of a human being still to come.

Narsai seeks to inquire into the hidden things but is puzzled about why words are kept secret from the scholars and unclear to other readers. He concludes through his reading and experience that the exalted things of life are not able to be physically revealed. Human language finds it nearly impossible to describe and speak of the spiritual.

Narsai concludes the homily with the purpose of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, for he redeemed humanity, purchased by human blood. Our contemptible human nature, therefore, has now been exalted by Christ, so that it has become worthy of prostration on the same level with God.

Homily 1 ‘On Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (I)’ is preserved in more than a dozen manuscripts including the earliest surviving collections of Narsai.¹ It was edited in Mingana 1.1–28, and a facsimile edition of Sn (1901) is also available as Patriarchal Press 1.1–39. The present translation is based on Mingana’s edition.

On the Divine Revelations to Abraham

M1.1

REFRAIN:

The angel appeared to Mary and announced to her, “From you the Light of the World will shine forth.”

¹ See A. M. Butts, K. S. Heal, and S. P. Brock, *Clavis to the Metrical Homilies of Narsai* (CSCO 690; Louvain: Peeters, 2021), 2–3, with literature cited there.

Narsai is Called Back to Learning

1. A remorseful mind urges me to turn back to learning;
to travel the way of the study of the scriptures that I had left behind.
3. My mind has become absorbed in the study of the divine scriptures;
the pure wording of their meanings has become dear to me.
5. I have been paying attention to how pleasing their meanings are;
and I have not been slow to search out the mysteries in them.
7. My mind has been wearing itself out night and day with the mystery of their words;
and I have been longing to understand the force of their canons.
9. My mind has been busy with this study, browsing over the words;
while the Evil One took hold of me and held me back from it, albeit I was not pleased.
11. My thoughts sank into weariness as into sleep;
like robbers, distractions arrived and disrupted my study.
13. The passions in my bodily members set the snares of silence for me;
and the mutterings that go with studying fell silent. Mt.2
15. Remorse for these things has inordinately much vexed me;
and as from sleep, I rose shakily at the voice of teaching.
17. Learning called out to me and roused me from my weariness;
like a child it enticed me, drawing me to study it.
19. "How long will you slumber, you wretched lover of sleep?
Get up, heed the voices of the Spirit's scriptures, full of wonder."

Revelations to Abraham

21. The revelations of the Spirit's scriptures are full of great wonder;
Moses testifies that the First Born became the first of the revelations.
23. He narrated how creation was established 'In the beginning';
and he showed us the beginning and the propagation of our race.
25. In his book we see the 'way' that completes the human journey;
and along it all kinds of reminders are set out like milestones.

27. He put Adam, like the foundation stone, at the beginning of humanity;
one after another until he arrives at Abraham.
29. He counted out twenty generations from Adam to Abraham;²
with Abraham he changed the regular flow of the journey of his wording.
31. Without limit, he limited the course of his words to Abraham;
he began to show the various revelations, which came about in connection with him.
33. The Spirit of the revelations revealed them to him in the Spirit spiritually;
he pointed in revelation to the Creator and to his ministers.
35. The Lover of Humankind fulfilled his will by the hand of Abraham;
he promised him that in him the nations of the earth would be blessed.³
37. The Creator called his beloved friend the 'Father of Peoples';⁴
he set up his confession of faith before all to see.
39. He gifted his faithfulness to become the treasury of the promise of his words,
so that every believer might trod the way to his "To Be".⁵
41. In his faith, he spoke as one knowing the God of all;
it was credited to him as righteousness of the will.
43. His soul's will became the guide for the course of his actions; M1.3
he set out to achieve the promises that lay before him.
45. The Friend of the just ones bound his friend by means of the promises;
and his friend asked him how and when they would come to pass for him.
47. "How will I know that your loving words will come true,
and that you will present me with the inheritance of the earth, as you promised?"

² The text reads 'Abram' here and elsewhere, but Narsai oscillates between Abram and Abraham throughout this text depending on metrical requirements.

³ Gn 12:3.

⁴ Gn 17:5; Is 41:8.

⁵ The Syriac technical term *itūtā* 'being', echoing Ex 3:14, was used by Ephrem as an epithet for God the Father. See E. G. Mathews and J. P. Amar, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Prose Works: Commentary on Genesis, Commentary on Exodus, Homily on Our Lord, Letter to Publius* (Fathers of the Church; Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 274 fn. 5.

The Revelation of the Sacrifice

49. The Lord showed him the portent of his love by means of sacrifice;⁶
by means of the animals [of sacrifice], he pointedly revealed future events to him.
51. 'Take three animals, Abraham, in behalf of the promise of my words:
a calf as one of three, a ram as one of three, and a goat as one of three.'
53. 'Take two birds, in accord with the promise;
content yourself with a turtle dove and a young dove.'
55. 'Divide the bodies and place the pieces opposite one another,
and by means of their severance, depict the display of what is to come.'
57. 'Set out the birds without dividing them into pieces;
by virtue of their wholeness, stretch your mind to the fulfillment.'
59. By these means the Good Lord taught him the ways of his will,
so that he would stretch his mind's vision toward things to come.
61. The righteous man carried out the will of his Lord and prepared the sacrifices;
he divided the parts into twelve.
63. He set out the turtledove and the young dove too, undivided;
he was expecting fire to come down and consume his sacrifices.
65. He was keeping close watch over his Lord's sacrifices;
he would not let the birds eat any of his sacrifices.
67. All day long he guarded his sacrifice from harm;
by the setting of the sun he was alert for the divine revelations.
69. He saw a furnace from which a fiery flame was rising,
and a fiery torch passing through, consuming his apportioned sacrifices.
71. Of a sudden great amazement fell upon his mind;
he marveled at how well ordered the reception of his sacrifice was.
73. The power of the Creator taught him to recognize the mystery of the revelations,
so that he would know that the time for the things he saw was far off.

⁶ Gn 15.

The Meaning of the Revelation of the Sacrifice

75. Now that the line of written words is complete, Mt.4
we shall turn to telling the meaning of the thought concealed in the words.
77. I heard the words that Moses inscribed in the book he wrote;
words are hidden within words as in a cloak.
79. A cloak of words was spread over the Spirit's words;
I want to know the reason why they were concealed.
81. Their obscurity has made me want to search out what is in them,
so that I might know how to explain them to those who love the study of spiritual things.
83. Come listener, listen to the idea of Abraham's sacrifice;
look to understand how appealing the several phases of his sacrifice are.
85. By means of the three animals, he taught him to know of the enslavement of his progeny;
and by means of their enslavement he showed him the numerical order of the Tribes.
87. The just man's progeny was divided into twelve tribes;
he anticipated its division by way of dividing the three animals.
89. Three generations would be enslaved by foreigners;
he depicted the harshness of their labor by means of the mute creatures.
91. In their youth, he would be putting them under the yoke of slaves;
because of this, he appointed the threesome to be sacrificed.
93. With the sacrifices he was prepared to show honor to the name of the Creator;
he performed his sacrifice as a guide for his children.
95. By naming the animals, he was teaching him the varieties of compassion;
he depicted a type for him so that he might well see his Lord's portent.
97. With his sacrifices, he depicted for him the whole ritual of the Law,
with the ram, the bull, the turtle dove, and the young dove.
99. He taught him to take three kinds of animals,
and two kinds of birds, agreeing in their names.
101. By means of those who tread on the earth, he showed him his labor among foreigners;
by means of the birds, he revealed to him the one who would end enslavement.
103. By means of the turtledove he was depicting the wilderness dweller for him;
by means of the young dove, the settlement in the land of the Canaanites.

105. By means of the desert lover, he was instructing him about the desert outside;
by means of the lover of the sown, the conduct of peoples and cities.
107. On this account, he did not divide them while they were being sacrificed;
albeit the People were not mingled with the Peoples, neither in the desert nor the sown.
109. Abraham's guarding of the corpses from harm
was in reference to his Lord's beneficence, who was watching over his children. Mi.5
111. He signified the harm done by the Egyptians by means of the birds,
and he showed that the power of his beneficence was stronger than the Egyptians.⁷
113. He pointedly depicted the slavery among the Egyptians for him;
for this he set out the bodily parts opposite one another.
115. In harsh labor they were were tormented one before the other,⁸
and they were not able to come to the aid of one another.
117. The Knower of All was keeping watch over this enslavement,
and he likened the three animals to three ages in advance.
119. At the end of the day, he showed the time when they would be redeemed,
because when they were worn out, then they would be freed from slavery.
121. The redemption of his progeny was indicated in the reception of his sacrifice;
when the fire was happily devouring his sacrifices.
123. By means of the fire, how brightly did he show him the redemption of his progeny;
before the eyes of all they were freed from enslavement.
125. In the vision of the flame, he depicted two events for him:
the freedom of his People and the harsh scourges of the Egyptians.
127. In the brightness of the fire he perceived the acceptance of his sacrifices,
and in the smoke the harsh suffering of those to be scourged.
129. He clearly perceived the unclear;
that it both rejoiced and anguished at the same time.
131. It agreeably consumed Abraham's sacrifice;
at the same time it crossed from one side to the other as the arbiter.

⁷ Two terms are used to designate 'Egyptians': *āḡēbṭāyē* and *meṣrāyē*.

⁸ For this line, which is missing from Mingana as well as from Patriarchal Press (= Sn), but is attested in Da, see A. M. Butts, "Recovering Some Lost Lines in the *Mēmre* of Narsai (d. ca. 500), with an Appendix on a Stemma of Manuscripts of Narsai," *Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies Bulletin* 9 (2023): 11–12.

133. Even that just man marveled wonderingly at this distinction,
that it was simultaneously differing with and keeping to the ritual of its food.
135. Moses said that wonderment fell upon Abraham,
at the fact that his mind was led to see things far apart.
137. The things he saw by way of revelation were far apart;
and because of this he was amazed and struck with wonder.
139. The voice of revelation taught him how to see hidden things,
so he would know that the vision was real and its time far off.
141. The Lord was saying to his servant, "you will surely know⁹
that your progeny will be settlers among strangers." Mt.6
143. "For four hundred years, they will be slaves to slaves:
and from the subjugation of their comrades they will learn of my lordship."
145. "I am the one who marked the family of earthlings with the name of slavery;
and I put the yoke of the name of freedman on the slave Ham."
147. "With the very servitude to which the Just One yoked the wretch, Ham,
to that very one I shall yoke your progeny, as one not serving me."
149. "I put the name of servitude on the earth on this condition,
that I might make my Lordship known; that I am Lord of the slaves and the free."
151. "On Shem I put the name 'honorable one' in the mouth of the righteous one,
and with Ham I put everyone who is enslaved in the yoke of my Lordship."
153. "Behold, I have marked out for you, my friend, Abraham, the clear way:
travel straightaway by means of the manifest unto the hidden."
155. "Behold, I have shown you the slavery of your progeny and the freedom of your progeny,
so that by the two they might learn the conduct of both the slave and the free."
157. "By trial I shall teach them the ways of my commandments,
so that they might know how to keep the right order between me and humankind."
159. "I shall try the mettle of their souls in the crucible of slavery,
so that they might seek through hardship the means to content themselves."
161. "For three generations they shall be the slave to the slave of slaves;
the fourth one will loose them from the yoke of their labor."

⁹ Gn 15:13.

163. With these words the Lord assured Abraham, his servant;
he turned then to show him revelations even greater than this.
165. Greater yet is the vision of the eyes than that of words;
just as the sun's light is brighter than darkness.
167. For the words that were spoken at the time of the sacrifices
were far off a great distance from the deeds.

The Revelation of the Three Visitors

169. In this next revelation a manifest vision was presented to view;¹⁰
it was carrying new tidings of pregnancy and birth.
171. This revelation came into view at a moment of wonder;
at that moment when the light of the sun was at its strongest.
173. With eyes of flesh, the just man saw a vision,
when by means of the light he beheld the Lord of the light.
175. The righteous one saw three likenesses of three men;
they were walking along with the likenesses they had donned. Mt.7
177. Just when Abraham was looking as if at three men,
he was unaware that the vision was immaterial.
179. While the nature of spiritual beings is immaterial and bodiless,
when they are sent to earthlings they display a body.
181. They are not in reality possessed of a changeable body;
but in appearance they display an immaterial likeness.
183. From their creation by the power of the Hidden One, they possess great power;
and by means of that power, they display the power of his divinity.
185. His power accompanies his creatures as he wills;
and most often he operates this way by means of the powers on high.
187. While not really having embodied the spirit, he embodied it in the spirit of the revelation,
and it visited Abraham in three likenesses in a bodily way.

¹⁰ Gn 18:1–5.

- 189. Of a sudden he saw three men coming to meet him;
he eagerly wanted to welcome them as he would any human being.
- 191. With an abundance of charity, he went out to meet them in accord with their dignity,
in the way in which he would receive any human being into his home.
- 193. The just man Abraham welcomed them as more than human,
when he was made to understand that they were not human, but spirit.
- 195. The spiritual beings were attired in bodily fashion,
and they came to Abraham to announce good news to him.

The Meaning of the Revelation of the Visitors

- 197. The Lord and his servants came to the home of the servant, his Lord's friend;
they were attired in the likeness of servants and master.
- 199. The God of all was ready to assume the likeness of a servant,
and in anticipation he prefigured what was ready to happen through Abraham.
- 201. From Abraham on he was ready to become the liberator of human kind;
in what he did, he trod the way to what would come to be.
- 203. The Word, the offspring of the Father, was ready to assume a human being,
and to call him by name the Son of God, King, and Lord.
- 205. He was ready to make an apparent body the temple for his love;
he visited Abraham in that bodily likeness.
- 207. He was well aware that Abraham's offspring would be subject to disapproval;
he resolved the matter of his nature in advance by means of his visit. Mt.8
- 209. He knew that they would say, 'How can a human be God?'
He displayed this in the figure of the body he displayed to Abraham.
- 211. Abraham saw the God of All in the body of a human;
it was not a body, but something resembling a body.
- 213. When he looked, it was a non-body the just man saw;
but the body was the semblance of a body, while not being a body.
- 215. Even Abraham was in doubt about this situation;
was the body that was appearing to him just a figment, or not a body at all?

217. His faith made the just man become a just man;
he saw the Hidden One in the apparent body and he believed it was he.
219. He saw three, who were invested in one guise;
he left two aside and spoke with one, as with the Lord.
221. The just man Abraham addressed the Just Lord as 'the Lord',
and he invited him to pay him a visit as to his servant.
223. The Creator did indeed heed his invitation, just as he made his request;
he came in along with his servants in order to portray the bodily type.
225. In a human's body, he would put everyone at ease with his majesty;
he took two spiritual beings with him and came to visit his servant.
227. Now he invalidated that rebuke made in Paradise;
he reconciled both the heavenly and the earthly beings to himself.
229. He brought them altogether with him to Abraham's house;
he seated them at the banquet right along with his majesty.
231. He called out to summon heaven and earth to Abraham's house,
in order to show them the greatness of his love for humankind.
233. He revealed the magnitude of his love to both spiritual and bodily beings,
in the visit he made with his servants to his own household slave.
235. At the man's house, he broke down the wall of anger between himself and humankind;
he summoned the heavenly beings as witnesses to the reconciliation with humankind.
237. They too became friends with humankind at the reconciliation with humans;
they rejoiced that the unanimity between themselves and humankind had become one.
239. The Creator put each with the other on a par;
he seated them at the banquet that Abraham had prepared. Mt.9
241. With his own, he, hidden from all, came to visit his own;
heaven and earth were amazed at the amazing thing that befell him.
243. Both the rational and the dumb were marveling, both in voice and in silence,
when they saw the infinite One reclining on earth.
245. The banquet, both spiritual and corporeal,
at which both the Lord and his servants were seated on a par.
247. The feast that was set out at Abraham's house;
it was both eaten and not eaten by those partaking of it.

249. How great was the fare that the just man provided;
its food sufficed for both heavenly and earthly beings.
251. Heaven and earth were seated at the just man's house,
the infinite God of All and his own finite property.
253. He revealed to Abraham the repast that there will be on high,
in that banquet at which he was present along with the spiritual beings.
255. He would soon confine himself in Abraham's son, due to the free choice of his love;
he revealed this in the great love he showed to Abraham.
257. He showed the just man great love in that he visited him;
he portrayed the type of far-off things for him by means of those events close at hand.
259. In the fullness of time, all will be together in love;
he displayed this in his love of Abraham, the loving friend.
261. The house of the Father of Nations was made into a second heaven;
both earthly and heavenly beings were abiding there.
263. Suddenly, something new happened at Abraham's house, which had never happened ^{ML.10}
the spiritual beings wondered at it, at the magnitude of its wonderment. [before;
265. The powers on high were awestruck at the magnitude of its wonderment;
"Why did the Hidden One do such a thing in the company of earthlings?"
267. "From the day when we came to be, this sort of thing that happened has never been seen
it is unheard of that 'the Being' has shown himself to his servants." [by us;
269. "For just a little less than three millennia until now,
he has never given us any insight into the secrecy of the magnitude of his love."
271. "In behalf of a man, the Lover of humankind has revealed his love to us;
more than to any other human being, he showed this to Abraham."
273. He chose two spiritual beings of the total for his visitation;
they visited Abraham in the likeness of visible men.
275. Abraham then received them as men;
he paid honor to the visible configuration.
277. He prepared and set out flour cakes, a calf, milk, and butter,
thinking that these things were suitable tokens of love.
279. The Creator then lovingly received his free will offering of love,
knowing that this would be of advantage to the earthlings.

281. That power, that neither heaven nor earth can match,
which he, without actually confining it, confined it for the sake of humankind.
283. For the sake of humankind, he visited a man whose name was Abraham;
the One, who was foreign to food and drink, ate and drank.
285. The Word, who is of him, was ready to assume one man
and with his own hands to bring about what would come to be at the end of time.
287. He made that one man his own in accord with his love,
and he assigned his human qualities to his divinity.
289. That man partook of food and drink;
he ate in anticipation, that by means of his eating he might affirm his corporeality.
291. Abraham's son was created in both body and soul;
he came to his father equipped with assorted bodily members.¹¹
293. Even Abraham, in his corporeality, was considering
whether what he was seeing was a body or not a body.
295. Perhaps he was thinking, in accord with the childlikeness of that time,
that even spiritual beings were accustomed to live on human food.
297. Perhaps he was thinking of this like a man,
and maybe he did it because of his charity, while he was not really the one doing it at all.
- MI.II
299. For he did not do it, nor was it really done at all,
because the Being (God) is higher than bodily likenesses.
301. His nature does not have the natural properties of earthly beings;
he is unlimited, not to be limited by the action of his hands.
303. He has no limitation that would limit him within its compass;
he is outside of all, above all, yet all is within his compass.
305. He was lovingly showing the secret of his love to his loving friend,
so that he might instill in his loving friends an ardent desire to behold him.
307. Before the onlookers he affixed the standard of his love in Abraham,
so that they might come to see the hidden in the manifest, albeit not really seeing at all.

¹¹ Alternatively: along with his father, he was equipped with assorted bodily members.

309. Even Abraham saw him in love, albeit he did not really see him;
his own voice testifies that humankind will not see him and live.¹²
311. Abraham did not see the One hidden from all the children of Abraham;
take heed you do not go astray and lead people astray about Abraham.
313. Abraham was a just man and truly his love was true;
in truth he really did see likenesses without constituent parts.
315. He saw a vision of something unattainable, without constituent parts;
he beheld a likeness, which was inimitable, boundless.
317. This is the customary way of the God of All, who deals this way,
with creatures unable to see his divinity.
319. He appeared in this kind of likeness to twenty generations;
in the tenth one, he issued a rebuke and destroyed them all.
321. From Noah onward, he began to act gently with humankind;
he repented and counted ten generations up to Abraham.
323. With Abraham he completed twenty ages of human nature,
then he began to display various acts of clemency and kindness.
325. He revealed his will to his loving friend in a gentle vision;
he spoke his mind with him in kindness.
327. In the speech of his People the threats of judicial sentence were annulled:
the transgression of the commandment; the destruction by water; and the division of speech.¹³
329. To him alone did he make the promise that would not be broken,¹⁴
that by means of his progeny, the Peoples would return to the fear of the Truth.
331. With this thought, he lowered his being to go to him;
he went in, albeit he did not really go in, because his nature would not go in.
333. The nature of his Being cannot be limited by any other natural thing,
because there is no limit to his perpetuity, which is without a beginning.
335. He is without beginning and without end; he is.
As we say, "Whoever speaks, his word falls short."

MI.12

¹² Ex 33:20.¹³ Gn 3, 7, 8, 11.¹⁴ Gn 22:18.

337. I have even said what I have said in his words,
but my mind is incapable of grasping the sum of what I have said.
339. I have said that it is written that the Creator visited Abraham's house;
it did not happen as a finite fact, but in a vision.
341. In the vision of a man, the man, Abraham, saw God,
he received him in his home as a visible man.
343. I have said that he received him as a man, not by nature;
it was not in the natural way that the eye would see divinity.
345. In the vision that he saw, Abraham did not see his nature;
rather, it was by way of a mystery that he was said to be in a body of his own.
347. By way of a body of his own, he was turning everyone to knowledge of him;
he anticipated the announcement of the Gospel, full of life for humankind.
349. Life for humankind lay hidden from everyone in the God of All;
he revealed it before the eyes of all creatures by means of Abraham.
351. All creation has considered Abraham's vision;
but they have not been satisfied with just seeing an invisible vision.
353. The articulate and the speechless have wondered aloud and in silence;
why is it that the whole world gathered at Abraham's house?
355. The articulate especially have wondered about this marvel,
for they are possessed of a mind to consider well what was not apparent.
357. The Originator of All has initiated them into the mystery of his revelation,
because they are reliable enough to observe the mystery between him and them.
359. For the mystery is something hidden from all creatures;
he has revealed it to the two articulate natures, angels and humankind.
361. He revealed his will to two angels and one human;
he mysteriously showed them the mystery of his concealment.
363. He was ready to reveal the mystery of his love by means of a man;
and for this purpose he took along the spiritual beings and visited Abraham.
365. For that visit was a wondrous event, exceedingly wondrous;
yet while it was evident, it was not evident to those who saw it.
367. The spiritual beings did not understand the import of its meaning,
and neither did Abraham know the what and the why of it.

369. They were looking at the vision only externally;
they were incapable of approaching its import.
371. The Hidden One's will was to instruct the servants of the Hidden One MI.13
that they should not wear themselves out searching into the Hidden One, who is unattainable.
373. They were pondering the import of his will without satisfaction,
and yet they did not cease mounting the search into him.
375. The bonds of love were pressing on the mind within them;
when would the import of his concealment yield the secret sign?
377. The angels and Abraham were eagerly seeking the meaning of the words,
and they were expecting to see something in accord with their own desire.
379. Both sides were wearing themselves out with this desire,
namely, what is this thing that the God of All has done with us?
381. What is this, that he limited himself, while not having actually done so,
and then in a vision that was invisible visited his own slave?
383. What did he receive, that he would set out for him all sorts of foodstuffs,
when his natural Being is unreceptive to corporeal things?
385. By his power, he enlivens even our nature without food;
how he did what he did is an utter marvel.
387. The word that Moses spoke is fully a great marvel,
that the Lord of creation would be fed by his creatures.
389. What the son of the Hebrews said is unspeakable,
that the Being, who is over all, was reclining on the earth along with his creatures.
391. Abraham arranged all sorts of seeable morsels before the non-seeable;
who would not be surprised that food would enter the non-composite?
393. The onlookers were observing with their senses and [mental] faculties,
and yet while seeing, they were not actually seeing.
395. What happened at Abraham's house did not happen in actual fact,
but in mystery, which is unutterable by those endowed with speech.
397. Those endowed with speech are not to speak of God's nature,
for what is spoken of is not really like what is said.
399. The words Moses wrote are simple;
literally they are both simple and compound.

401. What Abraham set forth in food and drink was not corporeal,
rather, it was a vision without a body that was portrayed.
403. What the hands held bodily was not a body;
rather, it was a spirit, whose might was even more subtle than the spiritual beings. Mt.14
405. The various kinds of food are not all ingested sensibly;
rather, even some solid food is taken with some air.
407. For it was the divine power that did these things;
the One for whom it is easy to draw everything from nothing.
409. He comforted Abraham with what he accomplished at Abraham's house;
that he would in fact fulfill what he had promised there in words.¹⁵
411. He had promised him the conversion of the Peoples at the hand of his progeny,
and he had shown him his being, as much as human kind was able to see.
413. The creature is not capable of seeing his Maker;
because of this, he drew likenesses before his eyes.
415. What Abraham saw with the eyes of flesh were likenesses;
they were not exact likenesses, but a resemblance.
417. Resemblance was all there was in that revelation;
the vision of a man, of the speech of a man, and of the food of a man.
419. It was the God of All who in his wisdom accomplished all this,
just as his might was accustomed to do in all ages.
421. He came to visit the creation he created by way of Abraham;
he showed him his love by way of the figure he had shown to Adam.¹⁶
423. In paradise he had shown Adam great love,
but when he forgot his love, he died because of sin; he and his children were guilty.
425. At Abraham's house, the new Adam came to make restitution;
he put on the likeness of that figure in Eden.
427. The transgression of the commandment was brought to naught at that meal,
and the dissolution of death came to light in the conception of Isaac.

¹⁵ Gn 18:14, 18.

¹⁶ Gn 2:23.

429. Two died in Eden for eating the fruit, Eve and Adam;
the day of the revelation to Sarah and Abraham restored two to life.
431. For Sarah and Abraham were dead in the barrenness of the body,
just like the death of Eve and Adam at the eating of the fruit.
433. Abraham heard the good news of the resurrection of all
in the declaration, "your wife Sarah will have a child."¹⁷
435. The voice that called out to Adam, "you are dust,"
is the one that called out to Abraham, "I will revivify your dead body."
437. The whole race of Adam came to life in Abraham, Mt.15
because by means of his progeny, the peoples would turn back to the Creator.
439. The conversion of the peoples was glimpsed in Abraham's vision,
and the great peace between the Creator and his creation as well.
441. The house of the father of all was filled with great peace,
while heaven and earth attended his banquet.
443. The Lord of Creation was reclining at the head of his hosts,
while the legions of heaven were at peace with the earthlings.
445. At the banquet of love, each was pleased with each;
the created natures were praising the Creator's name.
447. At Abraham's house, the spirit beings cried out, "Praised be the Creator,"
who showed his love and reconciled us with him, and us with all.
449. Worthy of praise is the One within whose control worlds are confined,
who lowered himself and reclined with us at table.
451. Heaven and earth owe him the one profession of thanksgiving,
who spoke words of peace with us, albeit not in his own person.
453. How great is the new thing the Lord of Creation has done!
While he is everywhere, he confined his being in one place.
455. That power, which holds all in the symbol of his power,
who displayed his being as if a pauper before something of his own creation.
457. That storehouse of abundance, who of his own gift feeds worlds,
who like a beggar asked alms from his own slave.

¹⁷ Gn 18:10.

459. Abraham offered alms of love to the Creator of all,
and he paid him a wage, a child who would give life to humankind.
461. The life of humankind was hidden within Isaac, Abraham's child,
and it was to be transmitted from one to another like a pledge on deposit.
463. Generation to generation had been handing on Abraham's pledge,
until it arrived at its own generation, the beginning of our life.
465. The beginning of life was displayed by our own humanity;
he pointed to him in advance, in the revelation that he showed to Abraham.
467. This was the reason for the whole story we have been told;
the first and the last things are contained within it.
469. This is the framework within which the ages and generations are included;
within it, the conjunction of the height and the depth is enclosed. Mt.16
471. Paul testifies that everything is encompassed within the Law,
and the Messiah, who encompasses all, is also one whom the Law encompasses.
473. The Messiah was the one spoken of at Abraham's house;
in the mystery of his peace, the Lord was reclining with his creatures.
475. This peace, which in the end was in one human being,
is what he depicted in advance in that banquet at Abraham's house.
477. That immortal happiness, which will come to be on high,
is what the Lord and his servants prepared among the earthlings.
479. The Hidden One settled all with all in a safe harbor,
and in what happened he provided the pledge for what would come to be.
481. Behold all that was done by the Lord of All, by the hand of Abraham;
come, let us consider exactly the reason for it.
483. Behold, the Hidden Being trod the way to come to meet him;
come, let us learn how to observe the right order of the mysterious events.
485. Behold, in revelation he disclosed the magnitude of his love through one man;
come, let us work hard to attach our love to his will.
487. Behold, he has willed to call us to enjoy his glories,
and he provided us with the type for them in the food he ate at Abraham's house.
489. Abraham provided bodily food for the non-bodily One;
for the sake of his love, he said he ate, albeit he did not eat.

491. Both the articulate and the non-articulate testify to us that he in fact did not eat, because they were convinced that the Hidden One's nature is immaterial.
493. He did not reveal his nature in the revelation to his servant; he taught his servant how to recognize the sign of his love.
495. Because of his love, he called Abraham a good friend; he taught him to observe the right order of love for his Creator.
497. In many ways, once knowing it, he inquired into the right way, so that the generations to come might know the ways of his inquiry.

Prelude to the Sacrifice of Isaac

499. He promised him a child; he gave him a child; he ratified his words.
Then he turned around and asked for him to be a sacrifice, for the savor of his will.
501. "It would please me that you would offer me a sacrifice, Abraham, my friend; appease my will with the sacrifice to me of your son, whom you love."¹⁸
503. "By means of the trial, I have learned of your love, that you are a good friend, that pleasing your friends much more than yourself is agreeable to you."
505. "The food of your love has delighted me much more than that of anyone else, on the occasion of the experience of that meal that was at your house." Mt.17
507. "There I clearly revealed my delight in the presence of the spirits; now, between me and you, I want you to accede to my will."
509. "A great mystery has long been hidden within me, along with my divinity, and, between me and you, my love, I am prepared now to reveal it."
511. "Something without a beginning has been appointed for me from the beginning, and I am anxious to disclose it to you as to a friend."
513. "My mind is ready a second time to create something new, and I am calling on you to participate in bringing it about."
515. "I am going to accomplish my hidden will by means of a man, and I am going to make him an intermediary between me and humankind."
517. "By means of his mediation, I shall display my love before all creation, just as I displayed it by means of creation at the beginning of time."

¹⁸ Gn 22.

519. "In the beginning of creation I revealed my secret in the image of human kind, that I am, and I am three hypostases in one nature."
521. "To this nature, not fashioned by any craftsman,
I gave the name 'image of human kind' when I created him."
523. "For his sake I created everything, both hidden and manifest,
and I set him up as the steward over all my creations."
525. "Even now, I am fulfilling my love for him in deed;
I am renewing creation, which has grown old in mortality."
527. "Because of humankind, death has corrupted the comeliness of my handiwork;
with a man, I am going to renew all, along with the man."
529. "I am going to do what I have said, to the shame of the devils,
so that they might not boast of having prevailed over me with Adam's sin."
531. "Indeed, in Adam, I am going to show them the authority of my Lordship,
and in the vanquished one, I am going to show them how wretchedly wrong they are."
533. "In death, they vanquished the image, Adam, the image of my concealment,
and by means of death, I am going to loosen the yoke of death."
535. "Sin made death be death for mortals;
by means of a mortal being, I am going to erase [the sin] from mortals."
537. "Sin and death acquired authority on the advice of the Evil one;
I have no desire for my servants to become the servants of another." Mt.18
539. "All who exist, be they articulate or inarticulate, belong to me;
I shall not neglect any creature, whom my hands have made."
541. "I created everything from nothing, as it seemed good to me;
now, by means of something, I am going to renew it, so it will never again perish."
543. "I concluded the creation that took place in the beginning, with humankind,
and it is by means of a man that I shall renew all, along with the man."
545. "I shall choose this man from you, Abraham,
because of the love you have shown me, of all who have been."
547. "I shall call you 'father' of all the people who have been or will be,¹⁹
because you have loved me and hated the error of the Chaldeans."

¹⁹ Gn 17:5.

549. "I shall make your son the lord and king over my creation,
so that all people will know that the name I have given you is true and right."
551. "Among earthlings, I have called you, 'Father of Nations', Abraham,²⁰
and in actuality, I am going to put the seal of your name on the child who is from you."
553. "In that child from you I am going to enfold my entire will,
and as in a temple, I am going to have the articulate and the inarticulate dwell in him."
555. "I am going to make your child the sanctuary of my kingdom, Abraham,
and in him I shall receive loving worship from all creatures."
557. "The creation that I created from nothing shall worship me in him,
and I shall give him the most honorable name, the name of my divinity."
559. The One not possessed of a voice spoke of these things with Abraham,
not plainly, but in unutterable mystery.
561. The mystery of the hidden is unutterable in the mouths of the articulate,
albeit that he spoke very weighty things with Abraham.

The Sacrifice of Isaac and its Meaning

563. The Hidden One spoke with Abraham of the unspeakable,
and he taught him the rite for offering him the sacrifice of his son.
565. "I am asking you, Abraham my friend, for the sacrifice of love;
offer it to me as the rite of love demands."
567. "I am ready to receive one of his offspring as the pledge of peace;
tread the way of the sacrifice of the mystery to that of the reality."
569. "I know that your progeny is reproachful;
they will reproach me when I carry out my will regarding your son."
571. "I am going to reprove their contentiousness with an unbloody sacrifice,
so that they will not be reproachful when the holy sacrifice is carried out."
573. "Take then your son, Isaac, the child whom you love;²¹
make him an oblation to me on the mountain I shall tell you."

Mt.19

²⁰ Gn 17:5.

²¹ Gn 22:2.

575. That voice, how friendly it was, and how harsh;
it was both spoken and unspoken, in accord with who he is.
577. It was friendly in love, in accord with the divine commandment,
and it was very harsh to the weakness of human nature.
579. The Lord of nature empowered the weaker nature,
in order to make it known that it could restrain its own nature in love of its Lord.
581. Abraham's Lord made Abraham the crucible of testing;
in him weak human nature was tested and acquired power.
583. The mind of the son of mortals acquired great power;
albeit he was mortal, in his mind he became immortal.
585. The mortal one, whose mortal nature had gone astray,
whose will trod down the harsh prods of mortality.
587. The passionate one, who put his passions under the yoke of his mind,
and he drove them hard in the arena of his passionate nature.
589. The sluggish one, who mounted up like a charioteer,
and subdued the passions of his body and the stirrings of his soul.
591. The mind, bound up entirely in labors,
which cast off the weight of its passions, like one unbound.
593. How well he bridled his instinct with the bit of silence;
of a sudden he went quiet about the journey on a troubled way.
595. That his mind was not now pondering those things he was accustomed to;
what is this new thing the God of All has demanded of me?
597. Indeed the promptings of his soul did not generate all kinds of thoughts;
when ever did humans offer humans to the Hidden One as a sacrifice?
599. The Hidden Power empowered the mind of the one possessed of a mind,
and he was not weakened in the struggle of the passions of body and soul.
601. The sweetness of the love of his Lord's friendship urged the just one on;
he diluted the poison with which the natural impulses were imbued.
603. Abraham, good friend of that faith,
which is unmindful of the affections of which nature is possessed.
605. Therefore, the One who chose you from all nations chose well;
he has made you the chief of all who would emulate your love's friendship.

607. Fervent in his Lord's friendship, he carried out his Lord's will;
he led his son on the way to go to the place he was shown.
609. The voice ordered him to perform his sacrifice in a place far off,
so that he would be proven in the eyes of both earthly and heavenly beings.
611. He showed his soul's endurance before the eyes of all creation,
how energized and undaunted he was in the travail of his way.
613. He travelled for three days, silent of any doubt;
he did not reveal the mystery of his Lord's will to any member of his household.
615. He kept the mystery hidden from everyone, between himself and his Lord;
he did not even reveal the plan he had in mind to Sarah.
617. He kept his Lord's mystery secret, between himself and his Lord,
so that the truth of his love for the Lord who chose him would prove true.
619. His Lord's command weighed heavier upon him than anything else;
in accord with his will, he was readying his own will.
621. His soul's impulses were tied to this will,
and he was looking forward to what would come about at the end of his journey.
623. The three-day journey along his way was complete;
he raised his eyes, he saw the place before him, and he rejoiced.
625. He showed him, with his bodily eyes, the place of his son's sacrifice;
in his mind he revealed to him the type of what was yet to come.
627. The true sacrifice would in the future come about in the place of the mystery;
he showed him the place where the mystery would be fulfilled in truth.
629. The sacrifice of the Messiah was going to take place in this very place;
he pointed it out in advance of the fact in the sacrifice of the mystery.
631. For the sacrifice of Isaac was the mystery for that of the Messiah,
and it was highly appropriate for the one sacrifice to match the other one.
633. The Creator's power was a match for his love's will,
so that those heeding the words would not stumble over the deeds.
635. The three days' journey took place with this understanding,
that the one sacrifice would testify to the other one: the type to the reality.
637. Abraham's mind truly hit this target,
and his soul found rest in the place of sacrifice his Lord had shown him.

639. At the place of sacrifice, he carried out his own will and his Lord's will;
he built the altar, arranged the wood, and bound his son.
641. He unsheathed the knife, and along with the knife he unsheathed his will;
a voice held him back, so he would hold his hand back from his beloved.
643. The spirit called out to the corporeal one, "Abraham, Abraham,²²
withdraw your hand, stay the sacrificial killing of your son."
645. "Stay the sacrifice of human blood that I had asked you for,
take and offer me the blood of the inarticulate being instead of the articulate one."
647. "I am not at this time asking for the blood of a human being,
because it would not suffice, by means of his blood, to blot out the account of debts."
649. "Human debt cannot be repaid by means of the blood of a human being,
until the perfect human being emerges from humanity."
651. "I know the time that will be suitable for perfection;
I am not wrong about when mankind will save mankind."
653. "I have revealed the salvation of mankind by means of sacrifice to you, Abraham,
so that all humankind will know how to recognize the time of mankind's salvation."
655. "Herewith, by you, I have prepared the way to what is to come,
so that humankind might make their way to the moment of hope, the abolition of death."
657. "On this occasion, I arranged matters and I asked for sacrifice,
so that I might reveal to humankind my hidden will for humankind."
659. "Through you, Abraham, I have revealed to creation my will for all;
heed, and having been instructed yourself, instruct humankind by your counsels."
661. "Do not think that I have rejected your sacrifice as imperfect;
actually I have given it to you to accomplish my will in the sacrifice of the lamb."
663. "I am giving you an inarticulate lamb instead of an articulate being;
and by means of the silent one I am teaching you about the various kinds of sacrifices."
665. "I have asked you to offer three sacrifices to me;
two were articulate and one silent, type and anti-type."
667. "By way of a type I accepted the death of Isaac in place of the anti-type;
instead of Isaac, it was the silent blood of the quiet lamb."

²² Gn 22:11-12.

669. "I instructed you how to observe the ritual of the end times;
carry out your desire by means of the temporal sacrifice and await the time." Mt. 22
671. By means of the spirit's revelation, he prompted him to look to the top of the tree,
and of a sudden he saw the lamb that was suspended in the mystery of the cross.
673. By way of the miracle that was worked in behalf of Abraham,
strange new varieties of his images were produced by the One of all images.
675. All the sheep on the earth graze as earthly beings;
Abraham's sheep was nourished in a tree top.
677. The lamb that was shown to him was suspended in a tree top;
instead of nails, wooden thorns fastened onto its body.
679. The anti-type's type mounted the cross in the likeness of the anti-type;
each one was girt as for death.
681. The One who would undo death was ready to die the death of the wooden [cross];
the lamb was suspended at the top of the tree to announce his death.
683. But let us ask, what is the reason for the lamb being in the wooden [tree],
and who suspended it, something far from the practice of the inarticulate races?
685. Inarticulate beings are accustomed unconsciously to walk around on the ground;
what is this, that this one alone is suspended in the wooden [tree]?
687. This much is clear, this one did not tie itself to the wood [of the tree];
some other being bound it and suspended it there, unreal.
689. The truth is a witness, and its truthfulness is undeniable;
a hidden signal suspended it in the tree by way of a mystic symbol of the reality.
691. Our Savior's mystic symbol showed us in advance the friend of our race,
so that when he would save us, we would not be troubled at how he saved us.
693. Adamites have been saved by means of the death of a human being,
and he prefigured the mystic symbol of our salvation in the death of the lamb.
695. John even called the savior of our race a lamb,²³
in that he was ready to save our lives by means of the sacrifice of his death.
697. The sheep that saved Isaac's life was one of [many] sheep,
and the man, who saved humanity by his death for humanity, was one of them.

²³ Jn 1:29.

699. The silent one, who cheered Isaac, trod the way of his own death,
and this is what he said, "Abraham saw me and rejoiced on the day of my death."
701. It was not that Abraham saw the [actual] day of his death,
but that he saw the day of his death by means of the revelation.
703. His death was concealed in the death of the lamb Abraham sacrificed,
and the life of all humanity was [concealed] in the salvation of its being sacrificed.

Narsai as Disciple of the Scriptures

705. If anyone should say that the homily I have recited is but a contrivance of words,
let him then say the same for himself, and I for my part will agree. M1.23
707. Let him show me from what has been written the force of meaning of his words,
and I will agree with him that he has well blamed me for a fool.
709. No, son of man, I have not foolishly just repeated the written words,
nor have I in my own mind feigned the force of meaning in them.
711. My thoughts have attended to the very goal of the written words;
from the recitation of them I have learned to speak of their meaning.
713. The words I have affirmed were not untrue in typology,
rather, in mystic symbols they well apply to the revealed truth.
715. The truth testifies that my word has not deviated from the truth,
nor have I exchanged its true words for fraudulent words.
717. I learned from the truth to recite the homily about it,
I put my mind to it as to discipleship to a master.
719. I am a disciple of the Spirit's books, which the Spirit wrote,
and for me what is true is that my mind has not deviated from the written words.
721. With confidence in the force of meaning in the [books], I have gone in their wake,
and with their aid, I acquired aid in speaking the words.
723. The words in the [books] have been the object of my study all my life;
I have no desire to stop and turn away from intimacy with them.
725. By experience, I have acquired the experience of thinking about what is in the [books],
so that it might thus magnify intimacy with the terms of [the books'] interpretations.

727. I have gotten a good profit from [the books], with which I can do business,
and I shall not cease repaying the gift even of the words.
729. I am keen to repay the gift to my teachers in words,
lest I fail, like a ne'er-do-well who borrows and defaults.
731. I am a debtor and I do not deny the indebtedness of my debts,
and I shall struggle to repay in words instead of deeds.
733. I have seen the words in books in action in their recitations,
and I have sought to understand the cause of this action. M1.24
735. A longing rouses me to labor along with the action in [the words],
and I shall learn well the force of the thought that is within them.
737. The force of their thought has compelled me to become an intimate of theirs,
and I shall occupy my life with the goodly study that yields life.
739. The power of the Spirit delivered [the words] by a mouth of flesh,
so that fleshly beings might ponder spiritual realities.
741. This pondering prompts me, even I, who am weak of thought,
to busy my mind with words that are fulfilled in the pondering of words.
743. I see that this sort of pondering is concentrated in the book of Moses,
and it entices anyone who ponders it to ponder it again.

The Power of the Story of Abraham

745. The story of the just ones is set down in it as in a treasury,
and one story is more concentrated than all of them, the story of Abraham.
747. The story of Abraham is for me the object of desire of this story,
from his narrative I have acquired the discernment to seek out what is hidden.
749. My thought is to inquire into the hidden things;
what is the reason why words are kept secret from the scholars?
751. Why are they not clear, in accord with the clarity of the meaning within them,
that the mind must now rush to reveal what is not clearly revealed?
753. If the force of their ideas were as ready to hand as their recitation,
it would be easy for anybody to want to ponder their additional import.

755. The Knower of All has done what he has done beneficially,
when he concealed the force of the Spirit's words in unknowing.
757. He gave the doctrine weight and importance before the learned,
so that eyes of flesh would not hold it in contempt because of its plainness.
759. Everything to be revealed was concealed from the vision of eyes of flesh;
everything concealed from onlookers was precious and dear.
761. This is the reason for the concealment of the spiritual words;
and because of their concealment, the power that interpreted them had to be exalted.
763. The power of the Spirit interpreted them in the mouth of beings of flesh,
and for this reason it is not easy to heed their meanings.
765. It is very difficult for a tongue of flesh to study the spirit,
just as it is for the foreign nature of mortals to [study] immortals.
767. The Immortal One was ready to become one of the nature of mortals,
and he chose Abraham and made him the beginning of new life.
769. In the son of Abraham everyone was to be restored along with everyone else,
while in Abraham himself, he depicted the paradigm of the one coming to be in his son. Mt. 25
771. It was on these terms that even Abraham was yearning,
(yearning) to see in his son the new vision of the new human being.
773. Abraham saw the renewal of humankind in the sacrifice of his son,
who died, while not having died, and he depicted a paradigm for both death and life.
775. From the moment of his father's binding him, he was thought to be dead,
while by the will of the God of all, he lived on in the mystic symbol.
777. It seemed right to the God of All, and he called on him to become a sacrifice;
then he accepted his sacrifice just as it happened.
779. The Knower of All did not do this with regret,
that he asked for the sacrifice and then turned around and said, 'I do not want it'.
781. As is written, it was not a test to learn of Abraham's love,²⁴
nor, in asking him for the sacrifice, did he seek to fulfill any need on his own part.
783. Before there was anything, he already knew Abraham,
and the will of humankind and spiritual beings too was already tried.

²⁴ Gn 22:1.

785. Everything that had happened or would happen was already evident to him;
there was nothing among deeds done or to be done that he did not know.
787. The deeds he accomplished were encompassed within his own comprehension,
and he is within all and apart from all, without any boundary.
789. Do not think, brother, that he would ignorantly think
that unknowingly he besought Abraham to sacrifice his son.
791. As might be supposed, he did not learn of the just one's love;
he is the One who taught humankind to acquire love, imitating Abraham.
793. He taught humankind how to understand everything he did in regard to Abraham,
and of all humankind, he chose him and called him his friend, for the sake of humankind.
795. He displayed to humankind the mystic symbol of the renewal that would come about at
so that they would think about what was to come, when it would come. [the end-time,
797. In the death of Abraham's son, he showed what was to come;
that by means of the death of one man, humankind would come to life.
799. In two mortal beings, humankind died, and in two they would come alive;
one was in mystical baptism, and one in reality.
801. Isaac died symbolically and he lived in the mystic symbol;
he depicted the death of baptism for us and the life that comes from it.
803. Our Savior truly died on Golgatha's summit,
and he truly lived again in fact and enlivened all.
805. We too have then died, both symbolically and in reality,
and we too are ready incorruptibly to live life truly.
807. The Messiah rose from the realm of the dead and he will not die again, Mt. 26
therefore our whole nature has also risen along with the One of our own race.
809. Those of Adam's nature rejoice in all that belongs to Adam,
and if one member of that nature rose, all of it rose as well.
811. Paul said, "he has taken us up with him to the place where he ascended,"
and if that is true, our whole nature ascended there too.²⁵
813. "Our old man has been crucified with him;
we die with him, we live with him, and we rule with him."²⁶

²⁵ Eph 4:8.

²⁶ Rom 6:6–9.

815. "With him in death, with him in life, and with him in glory;
who then will be able to separate us from his company?"²⁷
817. "If God is for us," as it is written,
who is capable of preventing our life's redemption?²⁸
819. The Creator swore by himself to his friend, Abraham,
"In you all nations are blessed in my name, which is over them."²⁹
821. His words to Abraham have been fulfilled in deeds,
as he promised, humankind have become the children of Abraham.
823. All nations are bound together in this hope,
and they are looking forward to when they will become children of Abraham.
825. The children of Abraham weigh equally in the story of Abraham,
and they do not wish to become nations other than those of his seed.
827. The Seer of All foresaw those envious of this way of thinking,
and he rebuked them by changing Abraham's name.
829. Abraham was only named the 'Father of the People';
after some time he called him Abraham, the 'Father of the Peoples'.³⁰
831. The first name, which his father gave him, was paltry and contemptible;
for this reason, he changed his name and raised his arm.
833. The Creator called the son of the Chaldeans by the Creator's own name,
because he was ready to raise his arm to the height of his own name.
835. He was going to give Abraham's son a noble name,
but first he ennobled Abraham's name in reference to the name of the one to come.
837. It was for the sake of his child that Abraham's Lord ennobled Abraham,
so that he would understand that the blessing of the Peoples was not just for him.
839. The Peoples of the earth were not blessed in him and his children,
until the particular one of his offspring appeared and blessed humankind. Mt.27
841. The one of his offspring, whom he chose of all of them, was the beginning,
and he offered himself as a pure sacrifice and he reconciled everyone.

²⁷ Rom 8:35.²⁸ Rom 8:31.²⁹ Gn 22:18.³⁰ Gn 17:5.

843. By his death, the son of Abraham reconciled all with all,
and he acquired an arm that is not to be compared with that of created beings.
845. By his death he remedied the deficiency of the children of his race,
and for this reason he was more exalted than anyone and everyone bowed down to him.
847. Along with the Creator, he would receive everyone's prostration;
this is the marvel, that everyone prostrated to him on a level with [God], the Being.
849. The utter marvel is the novelty that came about among earthly beings,
that their own nature would come to be worthy of prostration on a level with God!

Concluding Admonitions

851. Our own nature is possessed of the highest rank, right along with our Maker;
come, let us endeavor to repay the favor to the One who has exalted us.
853. One of us has become the victor who both overcame and granted victory;
let us ask him to help us in the struggle with our passions.
855. We are redeemed by the real death of one of our own race;
let us never again die in sin after having come alive.
857. We have been purchased by the purest blood of our humanity;
let us not then be sold into slavery to the Evil One, from which we have fled.
859. The God of All willed to accept one from among all of us;
let us not once again lose ourselves among the fleshly desires.
861. We have received the good news of the revival of the dead,
let us turn our mind to that restoration lest it be brought to naught.
863. The clear way to the height above has been travelled,
let us spread our wings for the flight by means of our own ways of life.
865. We are invited to the banquet of the divine King,
let us prepare garments fitting for the name for that feast.
867. We are by nature made children of the inheritance, who will inherit all,
let us tie our love to the love of the name of the head of our inheritance.
869. He has gone up to rule, up above the archons and princes,
let us rejoice in dancing that our race has been exalted above all.

871. Praised be our contemptible nature, along with its Maker,
let us put out our hand in gratitude of soul; may he be glorified.
873. The words spoken at our creation have been fulfilled,³¹
since we have become an image worthy of prostration, along with our Creator.
875. In that man, heaven and earth are bowing down to us,
let us repay the favor to the One who exalted us above all else.
877. Let our heart believe and our mouth give thanks without a doubt, Mt.28
that the will of the Hidden One has put on our nature and renewed us by means of us.
879. In soul and body let us sing praise in our whole humanity,
to the One who made us worthy to sing Alleluia to his magnificent name.
881. Let us tirelessly devote ourselves to the care of these things,
and to give no opportunity to our propensity to wander lost in the desert.
883. The desert is the aberration of our earthly desires,
let us not give in to desire lest we be condemned along with the guilty.
885. He passed through the night of bodily desires,
and the light of the rule of immortal life rose at dawn.
887. Let us show ourselves to onlookers as in the light,
and let them acknowledge with us the One in whose light we see the light.
889. Our Lord's appearance, when he appeared on earth, was a great light;
it chased the error of idolatry away from earthly beings.
891. Come, earthly beings, see and observe the fear of the truth,
that his light is brighter than the luminary that shines over the earth.
893. Our Lord himself called his preaching both light and fire,
by means of which both earthly and heavenly beings are enlightened.
895. The whole world is alight in the great light of the Creator's name,
let us abide in his light lest we be tormented in the darkness outside.

³¹ Gn 1:26–27.

HOMILY 14

‘ON JONAH’

Introduced and Translated by

Robert A. KITCHEN

Homily 14 ‘On Jonah’ exegetes the biblical story of Jonah.¹ It follows the canonical order of the biblical text but not in a precise verse-by-verse exegesis. Narsai begins the proem with the dichotomy of the people and the peoples, remonstrating with Israel, the son who thinks he is the sole heir of the father, full of pride and scorn, especially for the peoples who will be the beneficiary of the treasury of God’s mercy.

God’s revelation of a “New Gospel” to Jonah is resisted by the prophet who epitomizes the attitude of the people versus the peoples, afraid that if Nineveh were redeemed, Israel would lose its favored status. Jonah decides to hide himself but is weighed down by his *karyutā* (‘sadness, melancholy’), which keeps resurfacing. While knowing God rules everywhere, Jonah believes that revelation occurs only in Judah, so the end of the world, Tarshish, is the ideal place to flee.

The familiar narrative is aided and explained by the Sign (*remzā*), the inexplicable power of God which Narsai and other Syriac authors see as implicit in the biblical stories, although it is never mentioned. In the first instance, it is the *remzā* that creates the violent storm for Jonah’s ship alone, and the *remzā* calls the great fish to swallow Jonah, preserves him, then compels the fish to return him to the spot of original revelation.

Narsai turns the story upside down, declaring that it was not Jonah’s decision to flee, but his role was to depict for the first time the great mystery of Christ, including descending into Sheol as the fish. Jonah finally goes to Nineveh and “preaches a word of rage into everyone’s ears” (ln. 357). The king and the subjects of Nineveh listen and repent,

¹ For a study, see R. A. Kitchen, “Winking at Jonah: Narsai’s Interpretation of Jonah for the Church of the East,” in V. S. Hovhannessian (ed.), *The Old Testament as Authoritative Scripture in the Early Churches of the East* (BCOT 1; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010), 51–56.

and God is merciful. Jonah is displeased with God's forgiveness and believes that he will now be considered a false prophet and slips again into *karyutā*, depression. He retreats outside the city to die, but God sends a gourd plant to shade him and divert his sadness by the joy of fruits. Then the other divine presence, the Commandment, dries up the plant, and Jonah falls back into melancholy.

The homily concludes with the *remzā* rebuking Jonah at length over his sadness at the plant's demise, but not over the lives of the Ninevites. The *remzā* informs him that his experience is now the model of one who is to come who will redeem humanity, such as the Ninevites.

The unique characteristic of Narsai's homilies is his focus on the inner psychology of the principal characters, as he examines Jonah's prejudices about the nations, the fears for his own reputation, and his periodic descent into melancholy and depression.²

As is clear from this summary, the homily has some Christological features, especially to be noted is that Jonah's activity serves as a forerunner of Jesus's. This Christological reading of Jonah is already found in the New Testament with the Sign of Jonah (Mt 12:39–41). Narsai's homily can be profitably compared with the Theodore of Mopsuestia's exegesis of Jonah in his *Commentary on the Minor Prophets*.³ Comparison can also be made with Jacob of Serugh, who composed a homily on Jonah.⁴ Jacob's homily is incredibly long (2,544 lines), stretching almost five times the length of Narsai's. Jacob exegetes the entire canonical book in serial order with a handful of dramatic dialogues between Jonah and the natural forces, numerous typologies of the Old Testament narrative with the Gospels and of Jonah with Christ.⁵ Narsai adopts a different tact from Jacob, although as already noted still with Christological features.

² See R. A. Kitchen, "The Ascetic Narsai: Ascetical and Monastic Practice and Theology in the *Mēmre* of Narsai," in A. M. Butts, K. S. Heal, and R. A. Kitchen (eds.), *Narsai: Rethinking his Work and his World* (STAC 121; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 145–159; C. E. Morrison, "The Faculty of Discernment in Narsai," in Butts, Heal, and Kitchen (eds.), *Narsai: Rethinking his Work and his World*, 161–173.

³ See F. Thome, "Jona – Typus Christi. Narsais Memra über Jona im Lichte der Exegese Theodors von Mopsuestia zum Jonabuch," in D. Bumazhnov, E. Grypeou, T. Sailors, and A. Toepel (eds.), *Bibel, Byzanz und Christlicher Orient: Festschrift für Stephen Gerö zum 65. Geburtstag* (OLA 187; Louvain: Peeters, 2011), 363–386, esp. 380–385.

⁴ Ed. Bedjan 4.368–490.

⁵ See R. A. Kitchen, "On the Road to Nineveh: Dramatic Narrative in Jacob of Serugh's Homily on Jonah," in G. A. Kiraz (ed.), *Malphono w-Rabo d-Malphone: Studies in Honor of Sebastian P. Brock* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2008), 365–381 as well as, with more detail, idem, "Jonah's Oar: Christian Typology in Jacob of Serugh's *Mēmra* 122 on Jonah," *Hugoye* 11 (2011): 29–62.

Homily 14 'On Jonah' is preserved only in nineteenth- and twentieth-century manuscripts though it may have been found in Ua (1715).⁶ It was edited in Mingana 1.134–149. A German translation was published by Thome.⁷ The present translation is based on Mingana's edition.

*On Jonah the Prophet
recited on the Rogation of the Ninevites*

M1.134

REFRAIN:

Blessed is the one who through his works showed his glorious deeds. Fulfill and perfect his mysteries.

The Wealth of Scripture

1. The Creator deposited great wealth in the scriptures,
and shrouded it in mystery until the determined time is fulfilled.
3. He spread out parables upon the signs like a coat,
lest carnal eyes scorn the Spirit's treasure.
5. He hid its wealth from ignorant innocence
until it matures and then He opens to it the door of his mercy.
7. He cast fear upon those who know his covenants,
so that his wisdom's power may multiply before their eyes.
9. The childish of heart do not have authority over His hidden things,
lest His virtues are scorned by the soul's indifference.
11. The heir was young and incapable of managing his wealth,
and as strangers He gave us by grace some of his riches.
13. Although He shows His hidden things through his works [of creation],
He shrouded the salvation of our lives in mystery until the end.

⁶ See A. M. Butts, K. S. Heal, and S. P. Brock, *Clavis to the Metrical Homilies of Narsai* (CSCO 690; Louvain: Peeters, 2021), 15–16, with literature cited there.

⁷ Thome, "Jona – Typos Christi," 366–380.

15. He chose a single People and acknowledged it as an heir,
so that by means of it he might open the treasury of his mercy to all Peoples. Mt.135
17. The son who saw that he is acknowledged and distinguished above all,
senseless pride seized him and he scorned everything.
19. With carnal eyes an immature mind observes signs,
but does not examine the soul's movements by the power of hidden things.
21. The youth believed that wealth belonged to him alone,
and so scorned and despised his companions with foolish pride.
23. He did not know that on account of All he was honored above all,
for That One who is hidden in it will reconcile the whole world with the universal Lord.

The People Against the Peoples

25. The Upright also traveled upon this path of the People's election,
and considered the way of life of the Peoples pointless.
27. The law also supported⁸ them with the scriptures,
and made them zealous in the love of the People to hate the Peoples.
29. They did not desire that the uncircumcised become like the household (of Abraham),
lest the Chosen People depart from its inheritance.
31. They were not pleased with His message to the Peoples,
and Jonah testified that when he was sent, he fled and hid himself.

Jonah Resists New Gospel of Salvation to the Peoples (Jonah 1:3)

33. The Hebrew heard the resurrecting voice which revives its dead,
but was very displeased that perhaps they might live and the People die.
35. The new Gospel fell into the ears of the Hebrew,
and horror seized him by a new report of the restitution of the Peoples.

⁸ Literally: strengthened.

- 37. He assumed an abysmal melancholy concerning what he had heard,
and considered fleeing so as not to be sent on the road to the heathens.
- 39. The one circumcised of the flesh heard about the uncircumcised who live unfettered,
so instead of a coat he rent his mind asunder by divisive [thoughts].

God's Revelation to Jonah (Jonah 1:1–2)

- 41. Revelation called him and spoke with him secretly:
"Go out, gather for me rational sheep for the living sheepfold.
- 43. Get out and preach the redemptive word among those immersed in sleep;
and awaken those iniquitous sleepers by the sound of your words.
- 45. Come, travel on the road of proclamation to a foreign country,
and teach them the new way that worships my dominion.
- 47. Come, go reconcile those angry ones who have departed from my household,
and shepherd them by grace towards justice.
- 49. Come, go visit the sick who have endured diseases of iniquity,
and through your words rebuke their feverish minds. Mt.136
- 51. Take the medicine from the treasury of my dominion's inner nature,
and bandage them with repentance towards forgiveness.
- 53. Season and water their minds with compassion and mercy,
and wash off from them the dregs of iniquity by a sweet medicine.
- 55. Take the lamp of my luminous knowledge and place it in their eyes,
and chase away from them error's darkness that blinds them.
- 57. Season those who are irrational with the salt of my knowledge,⁹
so that they might acquire through you the sweet taste of the One Creator.
- 59. Show [them] first harsh words¹⁰ before actions,
and if they are suffering, console them with a forgiving word.
- 61. Arm yourself with the strength of divine assistance,
and descend to the struggle and trample the sin of human murder.

⁹ Mt 5:13, Mk 9:50, Lk 14:34.

¹⁰ Literally: harshness of words.

- 63. Take hold of the sword at the tip of your tongue which is full of the Spirit, and slay the tyrannical iniquity that rebels against justice.
- 65. Uproot the instruction of the name of the gods of iniquity's daughters, and establish the profession of the One God in the human mind.
- 67. Get up, go to the royal city of Assyria which has rebelled against me, and instead of arrows, cast into it words which are the voice of rebuke.
- 69. Call out to it and stir it up against pride's fullness by the sound of your words, and drop the violent upheaval into its ears, and see, it will be terrified.
- 71. Go and say to it, 'See, I will make the earth quake beneath you, and the report of the day of your fall will hasten to all the Peoples.'

Jonah's Inner Response

- 73. The son of Mattai heard the word proclaiming a violent upheaval, yet he resisted traveling on the road to the Peoples.
- 75. He observed his Sender's compassion which defeats his wrath, and thought that perhaps he might utter words and not be believed.
- 77. "I know that you are merciful and have pity on the wicked one, and your great love transforms anger's harshness.
- 79. Since I am going to preach fearsome words to the Assyrians, I suspect that you will not act according to your threats."
- 81. Two doubts lengthened the road in front of Jonah:
lest he be deceitful; and perhaps the Chosen People might depart.
- 83. At the end of his road the one being sent was examined:
the punishment of his People and the doubt of his words frightened him.
- 85. He chose a refuge so that he would not be sent on the road to the Peoples, lest the fence of the law might be torn down through his going.

Mi.137

Jonah Flees from the All-Knowing One (Jonah 1:3)

- 87. Jonah rose up to flee, to hide from the All Knowing One, and to dwell in a region where he would not hear the voice of revelations.

- 89. It was not a flight from God that the preacher fled;
he switched countries so that he not be sent for this purpose.
- 91. For he knew that the power of the Creator is everywhere,
and the work of his hands is not hidden from God.
- 93. He switched countries because of the declaration of prophecy,
believing that revelations happen only in Judah.
- 95. The son of Mattai thought that if he went far away he could ignore Him,
and would no longer hear the voice of revelations to go to Assyria.
- 97. He chose the road on the briny¹¹ sea to the region of Tarshish,
as far away as he could go from the voice of the Creator.
- 99. He hired a ship so that the salvation of the Peoples would not be obtained,
and left his country so that the Peoples might not be connected with the People.
- 101. He fled from dry land lest the heart of the uncircumcised be softened,
and traveled on the sea lest his voice's words turn false.

The Sign Disturbs the Sea (Jonah 1:4)

- 103. The fugitive went down into the ship and slept from his depression,
and the Sign went out like a messenger and disturbed the sea.
- 105. The hurricane became like a fisher and spread out its nets,
and Jonah fell with the sailors into the watery traps.
- 107. By the rod of the wind the Sign scourged the sea:
"Why, O fleeing servant, do you hide from the All Knowing One?"
- 109. It struck the silent [forces] and stirred them up against those who could speak,
and the mute taught reason with the Creator.
- 111. The wind and the waters beat against one another on account of Jonah,
so that they might snare him for proclamation to the Peoples.
- 113. The sea was extraordinarily disturbed on account of the son of Mattai,
as the agitated waves were seeking him where he had taken shelter.

¹¹ Literally: moist (*raḡyā*).

115. That storm was not like [one on] any other days,
and it altered the course of its route from the ordinary.
117. The scourging was not extended over the entire surface of the sea, Mt.138
scourging only [the area] surrounding the ship of Jonah.
119. A great wonder appeared among the waves,
for while the sea was calm, it was disturbed against Jonah, and serene against everything else.
121. Indeed, the Commandment which gave discernment to something without senses
troubled them on account of the speaking one who sought to be silent.
123. Indeed, how many silent ones deprived of intelligence were made wise
because one half was calm and the other half was extraordinarily disturbed?
125. The sea had been calm for the sailors while they were traveling,
but it was provoked by the roughness of the waves in Jonah's vicinity.
127. The air was peaceful and the waves were still and everyone else was traveling along,
but Jonah's ship was being battered by the hurricane.
129. The Divine Will's fence divided the sea against the sailors,
and they were awestruck for while it had been completely calm, it was disturbed due to
[Jonah].
131. A portion of the sea was being scourged by the Divine Will's whips,¹²
up until the lashing of the wind had passed over the Divine Will's boundary.
133. [The hurricane] struck the ship down to the depths, but it did not break up,
and raised it back up to the sea's surface, but it did not overturn.
135. The Divine Will was watchful over it and the wind's rod was scourging it,
and it was ascending to the heights and descending to the depths, but [the storm] did not
[destroy [the ship]].

The Sailors Praying and Jonah Sleeping (Jonah 1:5–6)

137. With the scourging of his ship the sailors were battered by the harsh lashings,
and lost hope [believing] that they would not be rescued from the storms.

¹² Literally: straps (*ʿarqē*).

139. They advised one another that everyone should cry out to his god,
so that perhaps they might be rescued from the storms and see life [again].
141. The captain of the sailors awoke Jonah: "get up and pray!
Pray and seek from your god that perhaps he might relieve us."
143. Jonah was submerged under the weight of sleep in the deepest part of his ship,
and had not felt the lashing of the sea that was on account of him.

Jonah Recognizes He is the Cause of the Storm

145. The fugitive rose up and saw that the sea was disturbed by waves,
and his thoughts ascertained that the storm was on account of him.
147. He did not pray with the sailors to silence the sea,
for he knew that he had gone astray, and if he prayed he would not be acquitted.
149. He stopped praying as one discerning that he was contemptible of the commandment,
for even if he cries out, that One he had treated contemptibly will not answer him. MI.139

Sailors Cast Lots (Jonah 1:7a)

151. The sailors saw that petition was useless,
and took counsel to examine the iniquity of their actions.
153. They thought that a sinful man vexed the sea around them,
for they saw that it was calm but it swirled ravenously around them.
155. During the sea's lashing they acquired understanding and discerned and recognized
that on account of iniquity the storm disturbed half of the sea.
157. A gust of wind blew hard upon them and instructed them;
they figured among themselves that whoever had gone astray should reveal his sin.
159. As discerners they examined one another in the basket of lots,
so that the deceit hidden in the mind might come out into the open.
161. They cast lots to search out who is the one who had sinned,
and give judgment for his folly which had disturbed the sea.

The Lot Falls on Jonah (Jonah 1:7a, 8–9)

163. The Commandment descended into the midst of the lots and examined them,
and the lot of the Hebrew came up before the sailors.
165. The uncircumcised asked the one circumcised of body, “What have you done?
Reveal your actions and declare your people and make known your country.”
167. Jonah answered the sailors, “I am a Hebrew,
and a servant of the universal God who established the universe.
169. I fled and hid from the All-Knowing God,
but his Sign has trapped me in a harsh net of unstable waters.”
171. Preacher who wished to conceal his preaching,
but professed and revealed the fear of his Lord — while not desiring [to do so]!
173. For this reason he was sent to a foreign country:
to go preach the One God to eliminate error.
175. He fled from the People, but the Peoples caught the one who hates the Peoples,
even though he did not wish, he become a preacher to the Peoples whom he hated.
177. “I fear the One Lord who upholds all,
that is, he directs the sea and the dry land according to his will.”

Sailors Recognize Power of God (Jonah 1:10–11, 14)

179. The Gentiles¹³ learned from the Hebrew that a good servant
had fled and hidden himself from the All-Knowing God.
181. The sailors were afraid when they saw the wonder that was due to Jonah,
and sought to turn back towards dry land, but the sea would not allow.
183. The ship was tied down in the sea without a course,
and although they saw the dry land the Commandment held it back.
185. A gust of wind buffeted [the ship] from all sides,
and the waves were armed against it like mounted soldiers.

MI.140

¹³ Literally: the uncircumcised ones (*ʾurlē*).

187. The storm was turbulent and [the waves] surrounded [the ship] like an army;
a gust of wind enclosed [the ship] like a wall.
189. The sailors were divided¹⁴ regarding Jonah:
they were debating how difficult is [deciding about] his death and his life.
191. Being terrified they said, "What shall we do to Jonah?
Our deliverance is harsh and your death is vexing, do not blame us."

Throw Me into the Sea (Jonah 1:12)

193. Jonah replied to the sailors as one discerning,
"Pick [me] up and throw me among the waves and see, the sea will be calm.
195. For the swift lion, the mouth of the waters, seeks me;
give it its prey and it will not be provoked against your life.
197. The great abyss bellows against me with the sound of its strong currents,
and also the hurricane has pursued me and unsettled the sea.
199. Because of my folly a wall of wind has fenced you in;
it watches for my downfall and then it will tear down the fence of its waves."

Jonah Cast into the Sea (Jonah 1:14–16)

201. The sailors cried out to God in great fear,
"O Creator, do not condemn us with this righteous blood.
203. You are the Lord who has power over everything in the sea and dry land,
and you desire that this shall accomplish your will."
205. The sailors picked Jonah up and cast [him] among the waves,
and the storms became calm, and everyone was amazed at the power of the Creator.
207. Then they made vows and fulfilled them afterwards
on this condition that they become servants of the God of the Universe.

¹⁴ Literally: fell between opinions.

A Tomb for the Living Dead (Jonah 1:17)

209. The fugitive fell into the watery net and the waves ensnared him,
while mute [creatures] were silently judging his discernment.
211. The judge gave a sentence after his lashings,
yet broke the rod of punishment so that he would descend to Sheol.
213. He dug a tomb for the living dead one in a living body,
so that he might guard the life of the physical one in a living body.
215. The Commandment descended after the fish and drew it up to the heights,
and [the fish] ascended to receive the life of a living being and buried him inside itself.
217. The son of Mattai entered to dwell in the fish, a tomb within a tomb,
and the Sign closed the door in the face of the living dead one.
219. The fugitive descended into a completely dark prison, Mt.141
and bound his feet in the moist stocks of the fish's bowels.
221. He fled from dry land, but the sea captured him and gave him to the fish,
and the tomb took him into and enclosed him in a tomb — the depth and the fish.
223. For certain, a wonder was achieved through the son of Mattai,
because he descended still alive into two tombs and was not destroyed.
225. Hail to the departed one who was escorted to Sheol still alive;
Hail to the earthly one who was enshrouded in the garment of the body.
227. Hail to the mortal who was completely buried, but alive while he was dead;
Hail to the bound one who was completely bound up, yet was traveling in a tomb.
229. The living mortal was not afraid of the animal by [its] power,
the Divine Will preserved him similarly¹⁵ to fetuses in wombs.
231. Human life is not sustainable without air,
yet without air the fleshly one lives like spiritual ones.

Christ's Coming First Depicted in Jonah's Story

233. It was not his own [decision] to run and hide and not to be sent,
because the great mystery prefigured in him the One who was to come.

¹⁵ Literally: in the order of.

235. The All Knowing was not going to die, his tomb in the fish;
through his descent he inscribed parables of the future.
237. Through a human being He was going to make life for all,
and through a person He would free all from servitude.
239. Through the death of a person He was going to undo the power of death;
and so He buried Jonah symbolically before the event.
241. The body of our Lord did not see corruption in Sheol,¹⁶
and He preserved Jonah without corruption through the mystery of our Savior.
243. Three days in the bowels of the fish he buried Jonah,
so that he might become a type of hidden truth when it is examined.
245. The living fish became for him a tomb to depict the mysteries,
and a new tomb received his body which fulfilled the mysteries.
247. Something new was accomplished symbolically with the son of Mattai,
for when the fish swallowed his body it kept him alive.
249. But the fulfillment of the mystery of Jonah was also new,
for the body which covetous death had swallowed up was not destroyed.
251. The mysteries of things to come became new and were filled with wonder,
for the body buried in the tomb of a body was still alive and walking.
253. The son of Mattai trod a new road before the events [to come],
that, when completed, would not be strange for those who saw.

The Peoples as Parables

255. For the sake of the truth of our Savior, the Peoples became parables,
for when they were saved, they were not divided one against the other.
257. But if one circumcised of the flesh and uncircumcised of the heart should say,
"What is the meaning hidden in the mystery that Jonah performed?"
259. Why was it necessary that for three days he should be in the fish,
and live a life estranged from the life of human beings?"

Mt.142

¹⁶ Ps 16:10.

261. He would understand that [Jonah] had despised the commandment and word of his Lord.
Why was his punishment not in other traps, but in the fish?
263. When did He ever scourge his household as he had Jonah?
And who was confined while alive in Sheol like the son of Mattai?
265. In which era did He send his preachers to a foreign country?
And when did He ever send a prophet to the Peoples beyond the People?
267. Why did [Jonah] not prophesy in the land of Judah
when he discerned a voice to go to Assyria beyond the People?
269. Unveil the veil, son of Abraham, which is laid upon your face,
and observe truly what is hidden in the mystery that Jonah has performed.
271. Remove the veil that Moses spread out and cease from fear,
and clearly see the image of the king as he is.
273. Read and understand discerningly the books of the Spirit,
and see, you will learn that the mysteries are fulfilled in the expectation of the Peoples.
275. Fix your mind on the new mystery which the son of Mattai has depicted,
and notice that all the mysteries are fulfilled in the one whom you crucified.
277. Set your mind on the great height of his preaching,
for his road is comparable to that of the Peoples, with the Peoples who have repented.
279. May Nineveh be like a mirror to the eyes of your heart,
and see that the voice of salvation has gone out to the four corners.
281. Travel with Jonah and descend to the depths, and go up in his company,
and see, you will attain the heights which go beyond the end of your road.
283. The son of Mattai descended and dwelt in Sheol in the mystery of our Savior,
and the Sign kept insects for him as food in the bowels of the fish.

Praying in the Temple of the Fish (Jonah 2:1, 2–9)

285. The buried one prayed discerningly in the temple of the fish,
and assessed his thoughts and sought to persuade [God] to return [him] to life.
287. “Hear the sound of my prayer, O God of the Universe, and pay heed to my words,
and bring my life back up from destruction with the living creature.

289. I know that I have sinned because I did not serve you on the road to the Peoples. MI.143
Indeed, you have taught me throughout my life that you have maintained love for humans.
291. You called me to go for the salvation of people, but you did not please me;
remove my bondage so that I may go out to restore the dead to life.
293. I did not know that your love flows to strangers,
I believed that you possessed a single inheritance and you love it [alone].
295. I thought that if the uncircumcised Peoples are entering into your inheritance,
perhaps the heir that you have chosen will be leaving your household.
297. According to a lawful will you have judged this one,
for the impure Peoples are foreign to His fellowship.
299. Now since I have heard from its legislator that He calls out to the Peoples,
'I do not close the door of my mercy in the face of evil things.'
301. May my petition come before you, my God, and may I live by your word;
and may my life become a sign of life for the dead ones of iniquity.
303. I have said during my life's melancholy that there is no salvation;
if you so desire may I increasingly see your face.
305. Make me worthy to requite the vow of my lips in the land of the living,
for if I ascend I will not be silent so that I may proclaim life."

Jonah's Tomb Prefigures Christ's Resurrection

307. Good for the prayer of the confined one which took place [in] a tomb within a tomb
and broke through the wall of the fish and water and the presence of heaven.
309. Good for the one bound up in the exile of the watery depths
who stretched out his will instead of his steps to that One who had bound him.
311. Good for the buried one who preached against the One who buried him,
and He tore open the tomb at the sound of his words and he returned to life.
313. The Spirit's scribe wrote a letter in the watery depths,
and gave it to the mind to begin calling out before the All-Knowing.
315. The spiritual currents carried it and gave it to the Hidden One,
and brought back a word of hope to him so that he might return to life.

317. The Sign drew up the tomb which bore the alive dead one,
so that the body which was buried in its bowels might ascend to the place of life.

Fish Brings Jonah Back to Spot of Original Revelation (Jonah 2:10)

319. The fish hastened to ascend to the shores of dry land,
for the Sign which had commanded it to swallow him forced it to bring him back. *Mt. 144*
321. The Sign's pangs compelled him to give back what he had received,
lest the mystery linger in the tomb beyond the reality.
323. The ship ascended, bearing the mystery of salvation of the Peoples,
and placed its cargo on the seashore and returned to its place.
325. Where [the ship] had carried as it proceeded to travel to the depths,
there it went as the powerful Sign was dragging it.
327. It descended there into the same haven from which it had proceeded,
for the captain of the sailors who commanded [the ship] steered it there.
329. At the spot where the fish had swallowed Jonah there it placed him,
for he heard there that same voice from which he had fled.

The Voice a Second Time (Jonah 3:1-2)

331. The son of Mattai set out and saw the light and heard the voice
which was exactly the same as the first one, "You shall go to Assyria.
333. Come, go and preach the new gospel to the Gentile Peoples,
so that the full mystery might become your mystery through actions.
335. For this reason, I buried you while alive, and I opened [the tomb] before you,
so that you might open the door before foreigners to enter to me.
337. Through your resurrection I seek to resurrect the living buried ones;
see, I have taught you the salvation of your life: save those who are perishing.
339. Come, go and preach redemption of life to those who have been dead for a long time,
and resurrect them by the living hope of repentance.
341. Cultivate the earth of hearing of their minds' ear,
and sow into it the good seed of the fear of truth.

- 343. Uproot the thorns of idolatry of the evil seed,
and sow the word of the One Creator, Ruler over All.”
- 345. [God] indicated to him the road to the Peoples, although he did not wish [to go],
and He taught him that he should love the Peoples.
- 347. The son of Abraham acquired prudent understanding,
for he called the Peoples in the manner of the house of Abraham.

Preaching Fire in Nineveh (Jonah 3:3–4)

- 349. He began to travel away from the Peoples to the foreign country,
and traveled on the road towards Assyria as he was commanded.
- 351. The voice taught him how large the city of Assyria was:
he traveled three days inside Assyria, preaching in it.
- 353. [The voice] revealed and showed to him also its majesty which is from God,
and by means of it [the city] had come to an abundance of wealth and humanity. Mt.145
- 355. He began to enter, walking during the day into its center,¹⁷
and during his journey he began with a word full of rebuke.
- 357. He preached a word of rage into everyone’s ears,
“The city of Nineveh will be turned upside down upon its pillars.”
- 359. The deadline for the confirmation of his words was scheduled¹⁸ for forty days:
whether it is that they repent or whether [God] does not do as he had decreed.
- 361. The son of the Hebrews did not only proclaim upheaval,
for indeed, mercy was also mixed into the upheaval of the end he had decreed.
- 363. With terrible words he disquieted those hard of heart,
in order to bring them down from pride to humility.
- 365. With hard iron he cut off the disease of their deeds,
so that iniquity might not remain in the soul’s impulses as decay.
- 367. He applied a strong medicine to the ulcer of their minds,
in order to uproot from them the mark of iniquity that had slain them.

¹⁷ Literally: the midst of its streets.

¹⁸ Literally: marked out.

369. The preacher cried out like a trumpet in the city of Nineveh,
and the sound-waves of his words disturbed anyone full of pride.
371. He blew into it strong breaths of the word of his mouth,
and it shook everything that was nearby to ruin.
373. His word alarmed the rulers and lords at all levels,
and it gathered them to a new hearing of his proclamation.
375. He was not in awe of the authority of the government,
and did not shrink back in the face of wealth and the universally honored crown.

The King of Nineveh Listens and Repents (Jonah 3:5–9)

377. The people and king heard his words, trembled and were terrified,
for his voice, despising and disdaining, alarmed the rulers of Assyria.
379. They assembled, prepared to hear his word,
and he cast the net of his preaching and trapped them.
381. His word snared both the young and the old,
and by its swiftness bound up tightly the manner of life of all classes.
383. His preaching reverberated to the king of Assyria,
and he relinquished his crown, despised his authority, and honored [Jonah's] word.
385. He proclaimed a passionate message¹⁹ to all the people,
so that each person might turn away from his actions towards prayer.
387. "Let us hate the iniquity of our soul's odiousness by which we have committed impure acts,
and let us love the truth which is beautiful in its name and in its actions.
389. Let us curse the sin which has spread its darkness over our mind,
and let us look into the luminous mind of the word of the son of the Hebrews. Mt.146
391. Let our soul respond by the labor of fasting from enticements,
and let us hinder the onset of licentiousness by means of chastity.
393. Let us deny our mouths from food, nourishments for the body,
and let us restrain ourselves from the cultivation of greed.

¹⁹ Literally: word.

395. May even the animals fast with us from nourishment,
and may the mute natures weep with us because we have provoked [God] to anger.
397. Who knows whether the God of the Universe will have pity upon us,
and make the heat of his wrath pass over us and not destroy us?"

God Observes the Repentance of the Ninevites and Changes (Jonah 3:10)

399. That Good One saw that they saw Him while they were not yet [good],
for the iniquitous repented and changed His anger to reconciliation.
401. He made them hate iniquity even though they did not want [to do so],
and His mercy required the discernment of the soul's remorse.
403. He drew them into his knowledge through the hidden Sign,
and offered the wage of his gentleness for repentance.

Jonah Displeased at God's Mercy (Jonah 4:1-4)

405. The Ninevites did not tread the road of repentance,
the Hidden One through his love revealed his inner nature to his household.
407. On them Jonah inscribed parables of things to come,
for [God] will pity the Peoples at the end of the times by the second Adam.
409. The preacher saw that the Good One had mixed mercy with his wrath,
and became greatly distressed that a portion of his words might not be fulfilled.
411. He turned back in order to travel on the road of his first inclination,
and he began to recriminate, "This is the reason you made me flee.
413. Alas, Lord, my revelation²⁰ did not happen while I was in my land;
on account of this at first I fled so that I would not be sent.
415. For I knew that you, God, make mercy abound,
and when people repent before you your love [leads] to forgiveness.

²⁰ Literally: my word.

417. From then on I would be [considered] a liar before the foreigners;
it would be better that I should die and not be called a prophet of falsehood.”
419. “Did it sadden you that much?” the Revelation called out to him and spoke with him,
and he replied to his Lord that his sadness had reached a morbid state.²¹

Jonah Depressed at Repentance of Ninevites and Retreats Outside the City (Jonah 4:5)

421. The Hebrew saw that the Gentiles had repented, so he assented to die,
lest the living dead of the impure Peoples please him.
423. The passion of [his] soul’s sadness shook him abnormally,
so he chose death rather than life in order that he not be accused [of falsehood].
425. He left the city and went out to dwell in solitude,
while watching whether the decree he had declared would indeed be fulfilled. M1.147
427. He made a booth for himself in which to dwell for a short time,
on the pretext that perhaps the matter he had decreed was happening.

God Sends a Gourd as Mercy (Jonah 4:6)

429. The All Knowing perceived the idea that this one was seeking,
and his Lord drew him towards mercy through a trial.
431. The Sign made a young gourd plant spring up quickly;
and it spread out its leaves over Jonah and he rejoiced on account of it.
433. The son of Mattai welcomed the leaves and fruits of the worthless gourd plant,
for he perceived the wonder that had suddenly sprung forth and borne fruits.
435. His sadness was diverted by the joy of the love of fruits,
and he did not discern what was the reason of the sudden blossoming.
437. The Sign bound him by lust for the gourd so that he might become wise again,
for when he accepted it he would suffer more and learn its purpose.

²¹ Literally: had attained death.

The Commandment Dries up the Plant (Jonah 4:7–8)

439. That commandment which [God] suddenly gave him and bound him by his love,
[Jonah] turned around and rebuked it, and it dried up suddenly and saddened him on
[account of it.
441. The Commandment signaled the harsh sultry heat, and it blew all of a sudden
and dried up the gourd, and its leaves withered and its fruits fell off.
443. The sun beat down intensely upon Jonah's head,
and doubled [his] groans and his melancholy and he asked for death.

The Sign Rebukes Jonah for his Lack of Mercy (Jonah 4:9–11)

445. The sultry heat that came upon the preacher was not normal;
the Sign warmed him up abnormally with heat.
447. That Commandment which had disturbed the sea without precedent
is the [same] one that abnormally warmed up the reflection of the sun.
449. It taught him by the sea that he should not be disgruntled on the road to the Peoples,
and rebuked him with the gourd who does not care for a human life.
451. The young gourd plant became important to him and made his soul wise,
and bound him with love for sinners even though he did not wish [to do so].
453. He became an articulate disciple to the mute, a prophet to the gourd,
and the scribe learned he possessed discernment from the silent one.
455. The sultry heat which [beat down] upon his members fixed suffering in his heart,
and he began prostrations through experience with pity. Mt.148
457. The Mystery taught him love and mercy through the silent thing,
and explained them through the revelation that it would not be sorry for him.
459. The Sign whispered to him through a single message²² in his own language,
“Why are you sad about a silent thing which flourished suddenly?”
461. Why are you bound up by total love with weak things,
and do not approach the glorious things which human beings possess?

²² Literally: word.

463. Why do you love that which is not of your own [nature] and hate what is of your own?
and why are you jealous of the life of someone as [if he were] not a person?
465. Why do you not enter with righteous judgment against your thoughts,
and judge yourself with your mind by these things which are of your [nature]?
467. Where is the vigilant propensity of your discernment attached,
for you are not aware of your companions according to your own [nature]?
469. [Why] are you still sad about the destruction of the mute gourd?
How sad are you for me about those endowed with speech who are depicted in myself?
471. The external sultry heat inhibits you in the outer body,
but the inner iniquity of human corruption wears me down.
473. For the sake of something contemptible you have acquired pity and great passion,
but how much more do I have pity upon the precious ones who return to me?
475. Look at the one hundred twenty thousand small children,
and expand your mind to the counting of the whole people.
477. Have pity, son of Mattai, so that the great city may not be destroyed;
imitate me through pity towards your neighbors.
479. What do you gain by the destruction of the place which wrath annihilates?
No one praises the name of my essence in the dust.
481. Set [your] will straight to the goal of my mercy and my pity for its own sake,
for on account of this I have summoned you to me so that you might imitate me.
483. Take notice, I have commissioned you to bring back to me the Peoples who have strayed;
spread out your words in imitation of nets for trapping people.²³
485. I shall come to spread out a net of love over all Peoples,
and by your hands I have inscribed universal redemption through the Ninevites.
487. To the four corners [of the world] I have extended [redemption] for the worship of my lordship,
and see, I have demonstrated it through the actions of Nineveh which has repented.
489. One of your race I shall establish as the commander,
and see, I have restored my victory upon it through your exploits.
491. Through a human being I am making everyone return to my faith, Mi.149
and through his own likeness I have summoned the Ninevites to your proclamation.

²³ Mt 4:19; Mk 1:17.

493. The Peoples and the People will gather as one in love for me,
and you have tread the road prior to his advent on the road to Assyria.
495. On it I will tear down the fence of the law which is in the way of the Peoples;
for this reason I summoned to send you to a foreign country.”

Conclusion: God Used Jonah to Show the Salvation of the Gentiles

497. The Hidden One symbolically consoled the son of the Hebrews,
lest you might be sad for him in the restitution of the Peoples who live through him.
499. [The Hidden One] taught him by his own [example] that one should love what is his [nature]
and declared through him the salvation of the Peoples that was [as one discerning,
[hidden in the People.
501. He showed him on the road the new road of proclamation,
and tread by him the peaceful path to the place of life.
503. For this reason he expanded the scope²⁴ of prophecy,
and restrained the People and sent [salvation] out to the Peoples through the son of Mattai.
505. All observed the culmination of his preaching,
and it showed through him the beautiful picture hidden in the Symbol.
507. Blessed is the one who has written down for us through the son of Mattai the restitution
praise to the Hidden One who revealed through what is our own [of our salvation;
[[nature] about His hiddenness.

²⁴ Literally: course.

HOMILY 8
'ON PETER AND PAUL'

Introduced and Translated by
Philip M. FORNESS

Despite its title, *Homily 8 'On Peter and Paul'* focuses solely on the biblical figure of Saul/Paul, offering an extended exposition of the apostle's origins and teachings. After an invocational prayer (ln. 1–14), Narsai describes the sending of the twelve apostles and the seventy disciples from Luke 10:1 (ln. 15–46). He then turns to Saul's conversion narrative in Acts 9. After being filled with the Spirit, Saul becomes a preacher for Christ with a specific mission to the Gentiles (ln. 47–384). In this way, the homily establishes Paul as an apostle of Christ, equal to those sent out by Christ in the Gospels.

The remainder of the homily describes episodes from Saul/Paul's later life and his teachings. A brief description of the changing of his name from Paul to Saul in Acts 13:9 (ln. 385–408) is followed by a discussion of his ascent to the third heaven from 1 Corinthians 3:9–11 (ln. 409–464). After praising Paul as the ideal teacher (ln. 465–498), Narsai argues that Paul's teachings found in his letters support the Christological position of the Church of the East (ln. 499–546) and polemicizes against his opponent whom he claims oppose Paul (ln. 547–688). The homily concludes with an exaltation of Paul and a request for him to pray on Narsai's and the audience's behalf (ln. 689–704). The second half of the homily thereby neatly draws together the Saul/Paul of Acts with the teachings of the Pauline letters.

The invocational prayer leaves the impression that this was a homily designed for liturgical use. Ugo Zanetti's study of the eastern Christian commemoration of Peter and Paul offers important hints about a plausible context for the homily.¹ Zanetti identifies

¹ This paragraph, including the sources cited, draws on U. Zanetti, "Pierre et Paul dans les liturgies orientales," *Irenikon* 93.2–3 (2020): 285–345, especially 288–292, 300–302. Zanetti notably does not take Narsai's homily into consideration.

two feasts dedicated solely to Paul. First, a Syriac martyrology in a manuscript dated to 411 as well as a fifth-century lectionary from Jerusalem record a feast in honor of “Paul and Peter” on December 28th.² Based on the order of names, the feast may have undergone a change from a commemoration of Paul to a feast day in honor of both apostles.³ Two fifth-century homilies preached in the days after Christmas and focused on Paul form interesting points of comparison to Narsai’s homily.⁴ Second, a feast dedicated to Paul alone on January 11th appears in three West Syriac Menologia from the seventh through twelfth centuries.⁵ While the *Homily ‘On Peter and Paul’* offers no hints about the liturgical context, Narsai may well have written the homily for such a feast in honor of Paul. In the later East Syrian tradition, it seems likely that the homily found use on the second Friday of the Epiphany at the commemoration of Peter and Paul.⁶

At least two scholars have proposed an alternative understanding of the homily’s purpose. Narsai’s strong emphasis on Paul as an apostle to the Gentiles prompted Paul Krüger to draw a connection between the homily and the Church of the East’s missions throughout Asia.⁷ Following Krüger, Scott Sunquist claimed: “The structure of this homily indicates that the primary concern is not to glorify Paul, but to provide an exhortation to, and teaching on mission.”⁸ On my reading of the homily, there is little to suggest that it was intended as a tractate connected to the Church of the East’s missionary efforts. Rather, the homily’s focus on the biblical Paul may have merely brought themes to the fore that resonate with missions.

As for the content of the homily, Krüger argued that the homily was designed to persuade Judaizing Christians to accept orthodox teachings. Dmitrii Bumazhnov revisited this idea in a recent article with important results for understanding the place of this homily in

² F. Nau, *Un martyrologe et douze ménologes syriaques* (PO 10.1; Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1915), 11.6–7; C. Renoux, *Le codex arménien Jérusalem 121* (PO 35.1; 36.2; Turnhout: Brepols, 1969), 2.232.13–14. On the dating of the Armenian lectionary, see now H. Méndez, “Revising the Date of the Armenian Lectionary of Jerusalem,” *J ECS* 29.1 (2021): 61–92.

³ In addition to Zanetti’s article, see on the feast days following Christmas in honor of the apostles H. Méndez, “The Origin of the Post-Nativity Commemorations,” *VC* 68.3 (2014): 290–309.

⁴ Hesychius of Jerusalem, *Homily 13* (M. Aubineau, *Les homélies festales d’Hésychius de Jérusalem* [SH 59; Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1978], 1.499–508); Proclus of Constantinople, *Homily 28* (PG 65, 817C–821D).

⁵ Nau, *Un martyrologe*, 31.13, 37.4–5, 49.10.

⁶ P. Kannookadan, *The East Syrian Lectionary: An Historico-Liturgical Study* (Rome: Mar Thoma Yogam, 1991), 34, 75.

⁷ P. Krüger, “Ein Missionsdokument aus frühchristlicher Zeit: Deutung und Übersetzung des *Sermo de memoria Petri e Pauli* des Narsai,” *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 42 (1958): 271–273.

⁸ S. W. Sunquist, “Narsai and the Persians: A Study in Cultural Contact and Conflict” (PhD Diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1990), 116; for the extended discussion, see 115–120.

the theological debates of Narsai's time. First, Narsai's exposition of Christological thought quite clearly reflects the teachings of the Church of the East (see especially lines 531–546), even if it is not possible to determine whether the polemic is directed against miaphysites or Chalcedonians.⁹ Second, Bumazhnov identifies several points of correspondence between the present homily and *Homily 17* of the Pseudo-Clementines. The two works both address people who opposed Paul's teachings, seemed to have limited God by ascribing God a physical body, and were skeptical of Pauline mysticism — as in Paul's ascent to the third heaven — in the interpretation of the scriptures.¹⁰ Bumazhnov draws a further parallel between the homily and the Mishnah and Tosefta by pointing to a very rare interpretation of Proverbs 25:16 and 27 as a warning against excessive study of the Bible.¹¹

The connections between the present homily, the Pseudo-Clementines, and other late antique Christian and Jewish literature brings to light what might otherwise seem to be a homily devoid of context. I am not, however, inclined to follow Krüger and Bumazhnov in concluding that Narsai's opponents were of "Jewish-Christian origin."¹² Given the recent scrutiny this category has undergone,¹³ it seems circumspect to state merely that Narsai engages with traditions known from Christian and Jewish literature without presupposing that the rhetorical opponents of the homily correspond to a Jewish-Christian community in his time.¹⁴

Homily 8 'On Peter and Paul' is preserved in more than a dozen manuscripts including the earliest surviving collections of Narsai.¹⁵ It was edited in Mingana 1.68–89, and a facsimile edition of Sn (1901) is also available as Patriarchal Press 1.191–220. The present translation is based on Mingana's edition.¹⁶

⁹ D. F. Bumazhnov, "Jewish-Christian Anti-Paulinism and Merkabah Mysticism around the Schools of Edessa and of Nisibis: Narsai's Polemics against Deniers of Biblical Studies in Context," in A. M. Butts, K. S. Heal, and R. A. Kitchen (eds.), *Narsai: Rethinking His Work and His World* (STAC 121; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 43–46. The homily's Christological perspective is addressed briefly in I. Ibrahim, "La doctrine christologique de Narsai, Essai d'interprétation" (ThD Diss., Pontificia Studiorum Universitas, 1974), 108.

¹⁰ Bumazhnov, "Jewish-Christian Anti-Paulinism," 46–60.

¹¹ Bumazhnov, "Jewish-Christian Anti-Paulinism," 60–66.

¹² Bumazhnov, "Jewish-Christian Anti-Paulinism," 66.

¹³ For a summary and extensive bibliography, see S. Gross, "A Long Overdue Farewell: The Purported Jewish Origins of Syriac Christianity," in A. M. Butts and S. Gross (eds.), *Jews and Syriac Christians: Intersections across the First Millennium* (TSAJ 180; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 121–144.

¹⁴ A. M. Butts and S. Gross, "Introduction," in Butts and Gross (eds.), *Jews and Syriac Christians*, 12–22.

¹⁵ See A. M. Butts, K. S. Heal and S. P. Brock, *Clavis to the Metrical Homilies of Narsai* (CSCO 690; Louvain: Peeters, 2021), 9–10, with literature cited there.

¹⁶ I am grateful to James Walters for discussing a number of translation issues in this homily with me.

*The Commemoration of Peter and Paul*¹⁷

REFRAIN:

Blessed is Christ who chose his apostles / and filled them with the riches of his wisdom, my brothers.

Prayer for Inspiration

1. O good one who divided up the riches of his love for his household,
grant that I might be worthy of a small crumb of your gift!
3. O king who clothed his forces with the armor of the Spirit, Mt.69
direct my thoughts towards the goal of your proclamation!
5. O skilled teacher who has conferred reason on human childishness,
make my mind wise so that it might travel towards your words!
7. O one who gives life to mortality through mortals,
raise my senses to hear the voice of the word of life!
9. O scribe who set down the book of the Spirit for those who are bodily,
may my tongue run on the line of your word with my thoughts!
11. On you may the senses and faculties, the eyes and mind, meditate,
lest they be held back by the study of vain matters!
13. I am asking you, O help of the Spirit, who makes everyone rich:
grant me what is yours so that through what is yours I might tell about your wisdom!

God Chooses and Sends Forth Workers

15. You made the poverty of our contemptible kind rich,
and by you the simple world was made wise and acquired reason.
17. Your voice tread down the way of life among mortals,
and your command became like a guide for our ignorance.

¹⁷ Mingana's edition of the homily calls it a "Commemoration." But other witnesses to the text, including the fourteenth-century manuscript Da, simply label it a "Homily."

19. Through the message of our kin, you wanted to bring peace to heaven and earth which were divided because of our iniquity.
21. You chose twelve people from the terrestrial family, and you conferred on them the power of the Spirit to prevail over everyone.
23. By them you humbled the tyranny of death and the evil one, and by them you subdued the height and the depth under your authority.
25. Your will hewed twelve stones out of the mountain of people, and you made them like foundations for the building of your love.
27. With the twelve as with the months, the administrators of the year, you fulfilled and completed the restoration of immortal life.
29. To the four corners you sent them out in pairs,¹⁸ and they cultivated the earth and uprooted the briar of iniquity from it.
31. You then chose seventy and filled them with the Spirit of life,¹⁹ and they breathed into the nostrils of the world the breath of the living Spirit.²⁰
33. When the height and the depth had been raised at the sound of your command, they blossomed and bore fruits of glory to the name of your greatness.²¹ Mt.70
35. The harvest of the fruits of your seed which you cast on our earth multiplied, but there were too few workers of the Spirit to gather it.²²
37. Your will signalled to the ministers of your proclamation to make a petition to you to bring forth workers to gather your seed.²³
39. You extended the riches of the power of your gift to all ranks, and you summoned together the good and the evil to the banquet of your love.
41. You chose some of the good so that you might make the good zealous for the labor of truth, and you summoned crowds so that they might confer hope on the hopeless.

¹⁸ On the sending in pairs, here applied to the twelve disciples, see Lk 10:1.

¹⁹ Lk 10:1.

²⁰ Gn 2:7.

²¹ On Narsai's frequent use of the construction "the name of," see A. H. Becker, "Names in Fervent Water: Ritual and the Mediating Power of the Divine Name in Narsai's *Mēmre*," in Butts, Heal, and Kitchen (eds.), *Narsai: Rethinking His Work and His World*, 25–40.

²² Lk 10:2.

²³ Lk 10:2.

- 43. Through the righteous you revealed your justice, that you are one who cherishes the truth,
and through sinners you showed the riches of your kindness.
- 45. Through those who repented willingly, you revealed our freedom,
and through those who resisted, you showed that you were capable of everything.

Saul Opposes the New Message

- 47. The twelve followed you willingly and through the power of the signs,
and your command compelled your persecutor when he was unwilling.
- 49. Saul resisted the words of your proclamation,
and when he was unwilling, your signal brought him under the yoke of your love.
- 51. He was a zealot who was always zealous for the law,
and he was waiting for the payment of legal wages.
- 53. He was an athlete who was perpetually zealous in regard to the law,
thinking that he would be victorious by an earthly course.
- 55. In an earthly manner he was fighting in the toilsome contest,
and he did not know that he would not be crowned without the Spirit.
- 57. He was armed with fleshly observances,
when he descended to battle everyday with the senses of the body.
- 59. He was always clothed with weak armor with his limbs,
and the will of his soul was hindered from being victorious.
- 61. He bore in his soul the great goal of the name of the creator,
and he carried one confession within his mind.
- 63. He considered as superfluous all [forms of] worship,
for he did not accept a foreign god, but rather the one [God].
- 65. With this goal, he was persecuting the proclamation,
because he thought it was something foreign to the God of all.
- 67. The zealous one heard the new report of the manifestation of the persons, M1.71
and he became zealous and vehement to avenge the disgrace of the name of the creator.

69. He saw that lowly people were professing a new thing on the earth,
and he was clothed with armor to destroy them as though they were evil.
71. He could not endure, because he saw that the name of a human being was celebrated
and was being praised by every mouth as the name of the maker.
73. Zeal inflamed him vehemently like a fire,
and he sought to burn the pure grains of wheat as though they were a briar.
75. "Why do they deem worthy a nature that was made along with the maker,
and why do they elevate another power with the [divine] being?"
77. Why do they offer the worship of the hidden one to one who is bodily,
and why is a crucified man honored with the name of God?
79. I am not going to endure the great disgrace of the name of my God,
for people have given the name of his greatness to that which is made with his hands.
81. It does not seem right to me to turn away and be silent from what is proper
so that I am not accused by the law which has admonished this.
83. Moses has revealed to me, 'You shall not have a foreign God',²⁴
and he made manifest to me that the new things which would come are not true.
85. 'All gods who did not make and fashion heaven and earth
will completely perish, and recollections of them will not be commemorated'.²⁵
87. With this intent, the fervent one was clothed with a harsh zeal,
and he was persecuting the name of Jesus as though it were foreign.
89. He persecuted his name so that it would not be professed among the Hebrews,
and he drove out those who profess him beyond the people.
91. And because he saw that the proclamation had gone forth to foreigners,
zeal inflamed him to shut it out also among the peoples.
93. He received authority from the blind magistrates of iniquity,
and he went forth to persecute the light that persecuted the darkness of error.²⁶

²⁴ Ex 4:5; Dt 5:7.

²⁵ Jer 10:11.

²⁶ The majority of this *mēmṛā* retells the story of the conversion and early mission of Saul in Acts 9. References are provided when Narsai introduces a specific element of the narrative.

Saul is Struck by a Light and Hears God's Voice

95. The zealot proceeded on the way of the peoples to persecute the light,
and at once one ray shone forth, struck him, and cast him down.²⁷
97. With the staff of light the kind one struck that zealot,
for he was showing him that he was being led by that which he hates.
99. He shot an arrow of light at him and struck him on his eyes,²⁸
and he took his sight,²⁹ for he wanted to persecute the light of all. M1.72
101. He scourged the persecutor of the light with the light on his luminary,
and upon his face he struck and disturbed the persecutor of his name.
103. Wounded and blinded was the sight of his external eyes,
and the hidden light rose at once within his mind.
105. He saw a luminary whose light surpasses the sphere of the sun,³⁰
and he heard a voice that was sweeter and more pleasing than all voices.
107. "Saul, Saul," [the voice] summoned him gently, as though one who knew him,³¹
and it showed that it was acquainted with his zeal against its words.
109. "Why are you persecuting me, O one who is circumcised in the body but uncircumcised in the
and why are you driving out the name of my lordship as though something foreign? [heart,³²
111. Why do you threaten my preachers vehemently
and thirst for the blood of those who profess me when they have not sinned against you?
113. Why do you seek to tear down the height of the building of love
and to disrupt the peace that came to bring peace to a divided world?
115. Why are you fighting with the strong one who is stronger than death,
and why are you shooting arrows of your anger at the one who is victorious over all?
117. It is hard for you, a man, to kick against the goads,³³
and you cannot wage a battle through the senses with the spiritual ones.

²⁷ Acts 9:3.

²⁸ Narsai uses a word for "eye" (*bābtā*) that often means "pupil of the eye." In this homily, it seems to be synonymous with "eye" (*ʿaynā*). This word also appears in lines 141, 206, 219, 232, 235, 291.

²⁹ The word "sight" (*nuhrā*) is the same as "light" (*nuhrā*) in this line, and throughout the homily.

³⁰ Acts 26:13.

³¹ Acts 9:4.

³² Acts 9:4.

³³ Acts 26:14.

119. Your nature is too weak to assault the height where I am,
and it is forbidden for you to ascend to me since you are in the flesh.
121. Why are you, inflamed with zeal, persecuting me as though one who is dead,
and why do you scorn my honored name before onlookers?
123. Why are you zealous for the law, the childish teacher?
Leave childishness behind, and come draw near to perfection!³⁴
125. I am not dead, as you surmise, but alive,
and in me the promised life and peace of all are being established.
127. Even if I died in an iniquitous manner [at the hands of] insolent people,
I am nevertheless alive in a new life without end."
129. The living voice spoke these things to the mortal one,
and terror grasped him and he was disturbed and frightened at the voice and the light.
131. With two witnesses the living one showed his truth to the one who was dead.
By the voice and the light he revealed his life and his authority.
133. By the voice he taught him that he was not dead as he had thought,
and through the light he showed the truth of his proclamation.
135. The zealous one thought that he was persecuting a slain person,
and he saw that he was donning the diadem in the height and reigning over all.
137. In great glory, he showed himself before his persecutor,
as though in a mystery, a revelation, a fulfillment. Mt.73
139. He showed the mystery of that glory in the mind not in sight,
for a body cannot see such magnificence with the senses.
141. It was not a being that the fleshly eyes saw
but rather a mystery of the revealed image that is hidden in the height.
143. He and those with him became worthy to observe the sudden light,
but the understanding of the words was made clear to him alone.
145. Like him, they also³⁵ saw a luminary and heard a voice:
an utterance for them, a clarification hidden in the voice for him.

³⁴ 1 Cor 13:11.

³⁵ Literally: He and they.

147. O wonder that happened to Saul,
for he and those with him heard a voice that was hidden and revealed!
149. O hearing that although it was similar became dissimilar,
and one was understanding and the other was like one who is deaf!
151. They were hearing a voice that was interpreted as their speech,
and its power was hidden from [their] hearing and mind.
153. One was hearing and his understanding [came] with the hearing,
and another was hearing [with] a sense of hearing that was hidden from comprehension.
155. Saul was hearing and learning the power of that which he was hearing,
and astonishment was grasping his companions by the variation of the voice.³⁶
157. It was spoken to him alone in a mysterious way,
as a member of the household that knows to keep the mystery of his lord.
159. The voice taught him that he was waging war with it in vain,
and it showed him openly that it was not right for him to fight.

Jesus Reveals Himself and Saul Repents

161. He also accepted, heard, and consented to that which he heard,
and he replied in love to that one who had summoned him kindly.
163. "Who are you, my lord," Saul replied to that one who had summoned him.³⁷
"Who are you who are hidden, but your voice is revealed through actions?"
165. "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting," the kind one answered him.³⁸
"I am the one who died, and the power that clothed me with its love brought me back to life.
167. I am the one who was crucified, the seed of Abraham up on the stake,
and I crucified alongside myself the mortality which I brought back to life through my life.
169. I am the one who came down in my own blood to the depth of Sheol,
and I released from it the prisoners whom death had imprisoned for a long time.

³⁶ Acts 9:7.

³⁷ Acts 9:5.

³⁸ Acts 9:5.

171. I am the one whom you have scorned as one who was dead, who had died and was corrupted.
See and understand that I am alive in a life without end.
173. Behold! I have shown you the power of my victory through actions!
Cease! Do not persecute the power that is tougher than you! Mt.74
175. See from where I have spoken with you kindly,
and I have not preserved a penalty of disgrace for you because you scorned me.
177. It is enough that you have persecuted me without compassion through my preachers.
Hold back your blade and stop slaughtering my ministers!"
179. The fervent one saw the flame that was hidden in the words,
and the anger of his zealousness cooled, and he became restful and was at peace.
181. He came down from the height of foolish pride on which he was standing,
and he was clothed with the garment of humility and chastened himself.
183. He changed his voice from scorn to a confession,
and he began composing mournful tunes of compunction.
185. "Who are you, my lord?" And he called him "lord" even though he did not want to,
and a voice that was more gentle than his own answered him, "I am Jesus."³⁹
187. "Who are you, for the sound of your words is fearful and makes the soul tremble,
and your signal is quicker than lightning in regard to [its] actions?
189. Who are you, O man, for the light runs before your command,
and you scourge the one who hates you with cords of fire?
191. Who are you, for you dwell in the place above but your word is on earth,
and your signal commands the heavenly ones and the earthly ones?
193. I did not know that you are in heaven, but rather [thought that you are] on earth,
and I did not surmise that you are among the living, but rather in death.
195. Forgive me for I have sinned because I persecuted your name and your preachers,
and do not take into account against me that I withheld the glory that is right for you!
197. Ignorance has blinded me to comprehension,
and my faculties were darkened and I did not regard the beauty of your light.

³⁹ Acts 9:5.

199. And, therefore, because you wanted and your love summoned me to knowledge of you,
I am not going to labor according to the law, but rather in your love.
201. [I am] leaving the law and its observances that blinded me
and did not pay wages to my will which bears its burden and its heat.
203. My mind is compelled to labor under your lordship spiritually,
and my faculties are going to take aim at the goal of your proclamation.”

Jesus Sends Saul into the City

205. The kind one, who had seen him before he came into being, saw him,
for he scourged himself more than the scourge on his eyes.
207. He saw that he was preparing to labor with him with the senses and faculties, Mt.75
and he sealed him with his name and called him his own worker of the Spirit.
209. He saw that he was scourging himself for the sins that he committed,
and he took pity on him with mercy and brought him back to life with the hope of repentance.
211. He encouraged him by granting him an agreement of pardon for iniquity,⁴⁰
and he aided him in communing with his preachers.
213. “Arise, Saul, and enter the city to my preachers
so that you may learn there the hidden mysteries that are too difficult for you!⁴¹
215. Arise, enter, and see the persecuted ones whom you forced out from the people,
when the power that is in them is being celebrated among the peoples!
217. Go to the people whom you considered errant,
and learn from them the revealed truth of the power of the creator!
219. Go when the staff that struck you remains on your eyes,
and show them the sign of my lordship and they will receive you!
221. It is to them that I have given the key of mercy and of judgment.
Go to them [and] ask and, behold!, they will open the door of light for you!
223. It is them that I have made the stewards of the treasury of the Spirit.
Draw near to them, and they will receive you at the door of my lordship!”

⁴⁰ Literally: He encouraged him by the agreement of pardon for iniquity that he grants him.

⁴¹ Acts 9:6.

Saul Goes to Ananias who Receives a Message from God

225. The zealot consented to the things he heard from the kind one,
and he entered while blinded into the disciples' [house] as he had been commanded.⁴²
227. Three days he fasted while weeping and lamenting for himself,
and he was making a supplication that the sight of his eyes be restored to him.⁴³
229. At the end of his fast, he became worthy of seeing the revelation of the Spirit,
and he was sent to it by a certain preacher so that he might heal his pain.
231. The man who was proclaiming his name showed him his cure,
and at the laying of his hand the darkness was fleeing from his eyes.
233. Through a vision, [the Spirit] revealed to him and to the healer to whom it had sent him:
"Go raise the dead Saul who persecuted the living!"⁴⁴
235. Go give him sight in his eyes and his thoughts
so that he might see with his eyes and with his mind the light of my teaching!
237. Go make him hear the sound of the restoration of the body and soul, Mt. 76
and, behold!, the senses of his body and the faculties of his soul are going to be awakened!
239. Go make the skilled teacher of the testament wise,
and write [and] teach him to read my words spiritually in my new way!⁴⁵
241. Go say to the one who runs on the legal course
that there is no payment in the stadium of observances!
243. Reveal and make manifest to the contestant who is proud of his circumcision:
'A seal of the body does not grant you a crown of victory!'"
245. Ananias heard that he was sending him to his persecutor,
and he was astonished and despaired whether a wolf could be changed into a lamb.
247. "My lord, I have heard from many about this man:
how much evil he made those who profess you undergo."⁴⁶

⁴² Acts 9:8.

⁴³ Acts 9:9.

⁴⁴ Acts 9:11–12.

⁴⁵ On the phrase "spiritually in my new way," see Rom 7:6.

⁴⁶ Acts 9:13.

249. How shall I go to the persecutor who persecutes your name,
and how shall I reveal the mystery of your love to the one who disgraces you?
251. How shall I make the one who thirsts for our blood hear the sound of the resurrection,
and how shall I sow hope and love in the one who disrupts our peace?"
253. "Arise, get going," the Lord said to Ananias,⁴⁷
"for he was not a wolf as you surmised, but rather a lamb.
255. He is arrayed in the appearance of a wolf in form, but not in truth.
Even if he persecutes, he is not a persecutor but rather the persecuted.
257. He is very zealous, since he supposes that it is for the truth,
and he is seeking a signal and, behold!, he draws near to perfection.
259. He is the chosen vessel who is chosen and tested by the will of the hidden one,⁴⁸
and there is no blemish in him, in the pure gold of the innocence of his soul.
261. By the trumpet of his voice, he is going to proclaim my victory in the four corners,
and he is going to show my power in deed before onlookers.
263. By his words, he is going to abolish the obstacle of the law of observances,
and he is going to bring the peoples into the kinship of the house of Abraham.⁴⁹
265. By the thundering of his voice he is going to make the earth flourish so that it might produce
and by his words he is going to raise the dead to life who died in sin. [fruit,
267. I know how much he is prepared to undergo sufferings,
and it does not escape me that he is going to die everyday for my proclamation.⁵⁰
269. I examined how true his love is before he came into being,
and I know that he is not going to grow weak before enticements.
271. He is a good friend whose love is bound to his beloved,
and his fervency is not going to grow dim through disgrace.
273. He is a contestant who knows how to be victorious spiritually,
and the will of his soul is not entangled in earthly matters.⁵¹

M1.77

⁴⁷ Acts 9:15.⁴⁸ Acts 9:15.⁴⁹ Acts 9:15.⁵⁰ Acts 9:16.⁵¹ 2 Tim 2:4.

275. He is a robust laborer who is perpetually waging war with those who are opposed,
and he does not lay aside the hidden armor from his mind.
277. And because I saw how true the endurance of his soul was,
I chose [him] and sealed him with the seal of the Spirit since he was worthy.”

Ananias Heals Saul

279. The disciple heard the testimony of the words of the skilled teacher,
and he accepted and consented that the things that were spoken were certainly true.
281. He received encouragement from the things that he heard about the persecutor,
and he went to him so that he might then be affirmed through actions.
283. He entered and said to him in a gentle voice as he had been commanded:
“Saul, my brother, our Lord dispatched me to come to you.
285. That one who called you, ‘Saul, Saul,’ sent me
so that by my proximity the sight of your eyes might be restored to you.”⁵²
287. The sick one sensed the healer of the Spirit who had been sent to him,
and he longed to meet him, for he heard a voice that was like the one who had called him.
289. The healer also saw the sick one who greeted him,
and he did not refuse to pass on the medicine of sight for his eyes.
291. He laid a hand on his eyes that were sick,
and he removed the garment of darkness from them which had extended across the sight.⁵³
293. By the light on his luminary he was wounded and his sight grew dark,
and the light returned that had blinded him and it gave him sight.
295. O luminary that enlightens everyone wherever it wants
and darkens the sight of the one who hates it through its rays!
297. O wonder that, although it is a luminary which enlightens the eyes,
the radiance of its light blinded Saul’s eyes!
299. The light deprived the persecutor of the light by a luminary,
and it returned and gave him twofold sight in the eyes and the mind.

⁵² Acts 9:17.

⁵³ Acts 9:18.

301. At the laying of the hand of the healer of the Spirit, the darkness fled,
and sight returned and made the eyes and mind rejoice.
303. He saw and understood that the things he had heard were very much proven,
and he wrote them with the reed of the Spirit upon his thoughts.
305. He was baptized and purified, he laid aside the burden of the observances,⁵⁴
and he was clothed with a garment of kindness that the Spirit had woven for him. M1.78
307. He broke the seal with which he was sealed according to the law,
and he sealed himself with the new seal of the name of grace.

Saul Preaches to the People and the Peoples

309. The persecutor came back and began tearing down the things he had built,
while he was disputing with rebuttals against his [own] words.
311. From the law he was making accusations against Judaism,
and he was showing how inferior it was to grace.
313. Through actions he proclaimed the help of the Spirit,
and he was explaining the power that was hidden in the proclamation.
315. The circumcised people saw the circumcised one who was persecuting its name,
and it was disturbed and frightened lest it was time that the people would come to an end.
317. The children of Abraham saw the son of Abram⁵⁵ who left his people behind,
and he began to make the divided peoples kin to the love of Abram.
319. The circumcised and the uncircumcised marvelled at his transformation,
and both sides were filled with a great fear.
321. The people marveled at how he disputed against his people,
and the disciples also feared him lest it was deceit.⁵⁶
323. Through actions he showed the truth of his proclamation,
that he did not receive a transformation in form but rather in truth.

⁵⁴ Acts 9:18.

⁵⁵ The names Abraham and Abram are used interchangeably according to metrical requirements.

⁵⁶ Acts 9:21.

325. In truth he was clothed with the beautiful garment of the faith,
and spiritually he was adorned hiddenly and openly.
327. In love and mercy, he devoted himself to the labor of the truth,
and he was clothed with armor and arose in war against error.
329. He saw that his fight was not with visible flesh,
and he armed himself spiritually against the Spirit.
331. The king gave him the armor of the Spirit so that he might fight with it,⁵⁷
for he knew that his love wants to wage war spiritually.
333. He appointed him as a skilled commander for his forces,
for he saw that he was courageous against the sufferings of body and soul.
335. He wanted in his diligence to show the greatness of his power,
for if a member of his household is victorious through what is his, how much more
[[is the king] through what is his.
337. He made him wage war spiritually with everything,
and he was victorious by it and he paid him wages as a victor.
339. He set the world on one side and he [was] alone,
and all ranks were defeated that were against the truth, but the apostle was victorious.
341. He waged a battle with the spiritual ones and the bodily ones,
and all forms of piety were overcome and became afraid, but his voice was raised. Mt.79
343. The earthly ones and the heavenly ones gathered so that they might examine him,
when he was fighting with all the sufferings hidden and revealed.
345. He did not want to come up out of the fight night and day,
until the evening of death came and he set aside his toil.
347. He did not lay aside the armor that the king had given him to fight with,
until he destroyed and obliterated the ranks of the evil one.
349. He did not sleep and lie down when he was traveling on the rough sea,
lest the riches he gathered sink among the waves.⁵⁸
351. He was always awake and guarding his treasury from damages,
and he was encouraging his companions with the sound of his words.

⁵⁷ On spiritual armor, see Eph 6:11–17 (see also lines 405, 475).

⁵⁸ The nautical language here could be metaphorical or refer to Acts 27.

353. His body was healthy with his mind in the faith,
and he was healing with his words the pains of the body and the blemishes of the soul.
355. With garments of his body he was healing bodies that were sick,
and by the breathing of his mouth he was driving away iniquity from souls.
357. He was raising up those lying down and aiding those who had fallen,
and he was setting forth the medicine of compunction for the stricken.
359. He was summoning and raising up the slothful: "Arise and be industrious!"
He was supporting and raising up those who were wearied through repentance.
361. With everyone and in everything he made himself equal so that he might bring everyone
and he associated with all ranks through his helping acts. [back to life,⁵⁹
363. His love was abundant, and he was bestowing [and] granting the riches of his words,
and he was urging [those of] every standing to become rich from him.
365. He did not leave behind the people among whom he did not divide up his treasures
nor the kingdom in which he did not store the power of his wisdom.
367. In all places he made his voice heard like thunder,
and they gathered together to him from every corner to listen to him.
369. The sound of his melodies was sweeter than all sounds,
when he was chanting the Trinity in everyone's ears.
371. O harp on which he was playing a song of the Spirit
and was making the spiritual ones and the bodily ones rejoice!
373. O flute that pipes forth everyday and does not grow weak,
and although it is weak, it becomes robust when he plays it!
375. O trumpet that was contained in one location
but makes its sound heard in all places as one who is nearby!
377. His limbs proceeded with his mind to the four corners,
and he gathered them to hear the marvel of his proclamation. M1.80
379. Through actions, the testimony of his lord consented to him:
"He is the chosen vessel who was chosen and tested in the crucible of the Spirit?"⁶⁰

⁵⁹ 1 Cor 9:22.

⁶⁰ Acts 9:15.

381. The will chose him, for everyone is revealed to it before he comes into being,
and it committed into his hands the treasury of the Spirit of his proclamation.
383. It annulled circumcision, the seal of the corruptible flesh,
and it sealed him with the Spirit so that he would carry out his labor spiritually.

Saul becomes Paul and Builds upon the Name of Christ

385. [The will] changed his name for he was called by a borrowed name,
and it called him Paul, the obedient, who obeyed and persuaded.⁶¹
387. Through his name, it explained that his mind consents to his name,
and through actions it completed his name and his election.
389. In all forms, he laid aside the name of Judaism,
and in everything he was clothed with Christ, the honored name.
391. He cherished more than everything the name that changed his name,
and he did not place anything alongside that one who chose him except for him.
393. In the name of Christ he was boasting in all afflictions,⁶²
and he was waging war by it and was victorious against error and its laborers.
395. It was the name that he set up as the foundation of his proclamation,
and on it he constructed a building of people who believed in his name.⁶³
397. Glorious is his building, beautiful and desirable is the height of his words,
and no one builds up the building of truth more than he.
399. "I have set up the wall of truth as one who is wise."⁶⁴
Let everyone see how he builds until to the end.
401. O builder who set up the foundation of the faith,
and as though with beams he constructed and built hope and love!⁶⁵

⁶¹ Acts 13:9. The words "obedient," "obeyed," and "persuaded" share a common root in Syriac (see also line 701).

⁶² Rom 5:3.

⁶³ 1 Cor 3:9–11.

⁶⁴ 1 Cor 3:10.

⁶⁵ 1 Cor 13:13.

403. O athlete who waged a battle with everything,
and everything was defeated by the endurance of his faith!⁶⁶
405. O warrior who was armed spiritually
and was fighting and taking aim with the faculties at the goal, Christ!
407. Who is capable of telling with words of the victory of your toils,
and who is able to portray your beauties with letters?

Paul Ascends to the Third Heaven

409. There is no mind that can approach the height of your toils,
except that one that is like you in the senses and faculties.
411. No one ascends to where you have ascended, as you have said,
unless he lays aside mortality in the mystery of your way of life. Mt. 81
413. The signal led you to the third heaven⁶⁷ and spoke with you
words that were hidden and were not spoken with the tongue of flesh.⁶⁸
415. O one in the flesh who, although he was in the flesh, flew above the air!
O mortal who was worthy of the immortal voice!
417. O he who was honored with glorious things that are higher than him
and humbled himself as though someone who does not know that he was worthy of anything!
419. O traveler who approached Eden even though he did not walk
and heard a voice which, although it was spoken, is unspeakable!
421. What did you say, O Paul, the chosen one, whose request is difficult?
How does the one who hears hear when he does not have the power [to do so]?
423. Reveal to us, O man! What did you, whom it is hard to hear, say?
Through which senses did you alone become worthy to listen to him?
425. If he does not have the power to be spoken to, why was he spoken to?
And if he was spoken to, then his hearing has the power to listen.

⁶⁶ 2 Tim 4:7.

⁶⁷ Literally: the third height.

⁶⁸ 2 Cor 12:2.

427. If you were worthy to hear something that cannot be spoken,
then you have also received the understanding of that which you have heard.
429. "I have certainly heard and learned the power of that which I have heard,
but it is difficult for those who are in the flesh to hear in this way.
431. Even I, who have heard, have not heard through the senses of the flesh
but rather by the mystery of the whispering which the immortal ones have.
433. Through the mystery of that sound with which they chanted praises at the creation,
I heard through it that which I heard; it was not in the body.
435. In the Spirit I heard the gatherings of the height in a mysterious way,
who were chanting praises spiritually to the power of the [divine] being.
437. Glorious and astonishing was the sound of the melodies of their chants of praise,
and the mind was not sufficient to hear that sweetness.
439. The ear of the flesh was not capable of that hearing,
and the tongue could not speak as their melodies.
441. It is a new thing that has happened to me alone. It is not for my own sake
that I have become worthy to see the creation in a mysterious way.
443. He wanted to show the riches of his mercy in me first Mt.82
so that he might grant through me a good hope for mortality.
445. With this intent, I became worthy of those things that are higher than mortals
so that by me humankind might be encouraged with the hope of life.
447. And therefore the signal led me as far as Eden
so that I might go see and bring the good news of that creation.
449. I know that I went, but I do not know how I went,
for the signal did not want to make manifest to me how I went.
451. It did not want to reveal to me if the limbs proceeded with the soul,
for even this it did wisely so that I might know my nature.
453. It wanted to show me as one untimely born beyond the [natural] order,⁶⁹
and it held me in my contemptible nature back from this so that I might not stray.

⁶⁹ On the phrase "one untimely born," see 1 Cor 15:8.

455. I am certain that I heard a voice and [received] understanding,
but I do not know if I was there in body and in spirit.⁷⁰
457. And whether I heard them has escaped me.
Why is the one who seeks to know how I went doubtful?
459. I went to and approached where I have said. Believe, affirm,
and do not doubt that I then heard those things that I have recounted.
461. It is not boasting that prompted me to recount the praise of my toils.
The zeal of fools compelled me to boast in things that are higher than me.⁷¹
463. For this reason, I wanted to make manifest those things that I saw
so that I might confer hope on the hopeless of the blessings beyond.”

Wonder at Paul's Words and Deeds

465. Who will not cherish the word of Paul who heard and persuaded
and did not keep silent and hold back his companions from that which he heard?
467. Who will not dwell upon the records of the words of the teacher of the Spirit,
[for] he explained and made the hidden mysteries rise before his disciples?
469. Who will not set the goal of his word before his mind,
for he aimed with the faculties and with the limbs at victory?
471. Who will not scour off the hideousness of his soul by the beauty of his words
and see his blemishes through the mirror of his beauty?
473. Who will not build on the confession of his faith,
for the winds of harsh sufferings blew but did not disturb [his confession]?
475. Who will not wear the armor of the Spirit in his order,
for he did not grow weak from the fight unto death?
477. Who will not travel on the way that he trod down towards the height,
for he arrived and approached the height without distress?
479. Who will not bind the faculties of his soul to his faith,
[for] he committed hope to writing and taught a love that is incorruptible?

MI.83

⁷⁰ 2 Cor 12:2–3.

⁷¹ 2 Cor 12:5–6.

481. How will the one who reads his letters refuse
to pay him, even if with words for actions?
483. How does the one who runs towards his goal turn away
so that he does not return the crown of victory to him since he is worthy?
485. Who has fought in the contest of truth like Paul,
and who has become worthy of the crown of glory more than he?
487. Who has become as wise in spiritual matters as his mind,
and who has recounted the things to come as he committed to writing?
489. Who is like that goal that the king set up,
and which one has aimed at victory in his likeness?
491. Who has labored without expenses as his labor
and has not taken wages, a human salary?⁷²
493. Who has run in the spiritual stadium,
and the will of his soul did not become tangled up in earthly affairs?
495. He hired himself out for the labor of the Spirit in the early morning,
and carried out his toil as though it were the last day of his life.
497. He started on the course of proclamation in his youth,
and he ended his way in chains and in his old age.

Paul's Teachings on the Divinity

499. O Paul, the elder and the one bound for the sake of the truth,
what mouth is able to tell about you as you are?
501. The mind is too lowly to run with you quickly,
and its wing is too weak to fly to you where you are.
503. There is one who knows how to return the crown of victory to you:
that one whom you cherished more than everything as is proper for him.
505. The signal that chose you can pay you the wages for your love:
that one who saw the toils of everyone before everyone came into being.

⁷² 1 Cor 9:18; 2 Cor 11:7.

507. You cherished its love. It cherished you and loved you and called you its own,
and it gave you power to be victorious by what was its own as though by what was yours.
509. It was not yours to be victorious over the sufferings without its power, Mt.84
for the nature of mortals is too weak to be victorious on its own.
511. It was not yours to learn the mysteries of the secrets,
for it is not for those who are made to understand that which is hidden.
513. [The signal's] love revealed to you as to a friend whose love is true,
and it made manifest to you the power of the hidden things that are higher than you.
515. You have shown your faithfulness by the money that it gave you so that you might earn wages
and it committed into your hands, as one who is faithful, the treasury of its mercy.⁷³ [by it,
517. Your love is faithful and the treasury that was entrusted into your hands is beautiful,
and no one knows how to manage [it] more than you.
519. You have proclaimed the name of the [divine] being in everyone's ears,
and you have shown the equality of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.
521. It is you who have made manifest that the child was not younger than his Father,
and the Spirit is not lesser than the Father nor the child who is from him.
523. You have taught us that the [divine] being in itself cannot be contained,
and you have showed us that it is not afflicted by passibility.
525. In the Spirit of revelation, you have revealed the mystery of the salvation of our life,
which the will of the hidden one has fulfilled and completed in the revelation of our body.
527. On the harp of your soul, you played the distinction of two likenesses:
the likeness of the servant and of the maker, hidden and revealed.⁷⁴
529. Your tongue became like a reed in the hand of the Spirit,
and it drew characters in the human mind, the word and the body.
531. Your voice proclaimed the word and the body among the mortals:
two that were distinguished in their natures but equal with each other.
533. They are distinguished, equal, hidden, and revealed, and named as one:
the Son of God who made the humanity which he took on participate with him.

⁷³ Mt 25:14–30.

⁷⁴ The words translated as “servant” and “maker” share the same root in Syriac.

535. It is not a distinction of a son and a son that Paul brought forth
so that you might not compare a heretic with the distinction of his words.
537. He distinguished the natures in regard to that by which they are distinguished, one from
and he brought them together in a unity to one person. [the other,
539. He distinguished them because of the sufferings and the glorious things,
and he made them equal because of love without division.
541. He divided them, but he did not separate them one from the other, Mt.85
and he made them equal through a will that wanted this.
543. He gave to each of them what was its own according to what it was
so that the [divine] being might not descend to the sufferings because it took on what is ours.
545. He made the exalted one participate in weak things through a borrowed name
and the humble one in the glorious things through deeds.

Paul's Teaching Refutes the False Teachers

547. If Paul, whom the Spirit chose, distinguished [them] and made [them] equal,
why does heresy condemn the chosen vessel?
549. Paul stated: "Who has the power to condemn Paul?"⁷⁵
And as for the one who condemns the Spirit that chose [Paul], [the Spirit] is going to find
[him guilty.
551. Be silent, then, heresy! Do not condemn
so that you are not found guilty by the harsh judgment of the Spirit!
553. Be silent! Do not cry out with the faithful ones, O workers of the false teaching!
It is enough that you have disrupted the peace of humanity with your schisms.
555. I am familiar with the fact that you hate the name of Paul very much,
and it does not escape me that you are displeased with the distinction of his words.
557. The poison of his words exacerbated the pain that is in you very much,
and you therefore hated him as a foreigner.
559. The one who hates people has blinded the eye of your minds
so that you do not examine the light that is hidden within his words.

⁷⁵ Rom 8:34.

561. He gave you a turbid cup of the bile of his anger to drink,
and through you he disrupted the purity of peace that had brought peace to all.
563. He taught you to assault the height in the presence of the [divine] being,
and he showed you the hated path of passibility.
565. He alienated you from the study of Paul's word,
for he saw that he was proclaiming that the nature of the hidden one cannot be contained.
567. He invented and taught his own scheme⁷⁶ to those who were like him
so that the hidden one might suffer and hold our body back from exaltation.
569. With this intent, he completed his will through your words,
and he confused the orders that the Spirit had set in order through the preachers.
571. It is in you that he hid his falsehood as in a garment,
and he entered and was concealed within the flock as one who is faithful.
573. It is you that he sent as spies to the members of the household,
and by you he scorned the proclamation as though they were robbers.
575. By you he took vengeance for his humiliation on the faithful ones,
for you tore into pieces the healthy body of the faith.
577. From your hatred towards Paul, let us learn this: Mt.86
that you have been armed with schemes against his words.
579. O! [It is] from the audacity of the heretics and the slanderer
that they are always rushing to confuse the orders of the Spirit.
581. The insolent ones along with the rebellious one have brought a great terror,
for they have trampled down and treated with contempt the pure truth by their blasphemies.
583. In your gardens, O king who has saved our kind, have compassion on our kind,
which after it was set free returned and was subjected to the servitude of death.
585. Humanity has left behind the way of your love that is full of peace,
and they have proceeded on a way that is full of fear without serenity.
587. They hated the preachers who proclaimed the truth and the faith,
and they cherished the false teaching of the lie which the evil one begat.
589. The name of Paul and his companions, the workers of the Spirit, has been left behind,
and everyone is weaving a crown of triumphs for the workers of false teaching.

⁷⁶ Literally: It was his own scheme that he invented and taught.

591. No one is bringing a testimony of words from the faithful ones,
for the folly of error has become established in the mind of fools.
593. If anyone recounts the word of Paul or of Christ,
his report is foreign and not acceptable to the ears of those who are stupid.
595. They hated very much dwelling upon the words in the letters,
and the study of it was regarded as superfluous to the insolent ones.
597. "It is not good to dwell much upon the glorious things,⁷⁷
lest the heart go astray in dwelling upon the words of the Spirit.
599. Inquiry teaches the study of words and leads the soul astray,
and the mind becomes drunk on rebuttals as on wine."
601. "Do not eat, then, too much honey," the wise one cried out.⁷⁸
"Behold! He has shown that you should not covet that which is written.
603. And the servant who knows the will of his lord but has not prepared it for him
is beaten [with] harsh torments by him because he knew but refused."⁷⁹
605. Behold! The teaching of the foolish teacher to his disciples,
who drew the characters and taught them to read from *taw* to *ālaf*!⁸⁰
607. Behold! The speech of the deceitful teacher to his audience,
who darkened them to the knowledge of the word of life!
609. Behold! The poison of the slanderer's gall which he cast down among humanity
and led them astray beyond the way of the Spirit's words!
611. The Spirit trod down the way of life through the mouth of preachers,
and the hateful one by his deceit filled it with rocks before the travelers.
613. He cast down fear and made them afraid of the teaching:
"Do not travel on the way of books lest you go astray!"
615. Come, preacher, chosen vessel who proclaimed the truth!
See the schemes that the evil one has concocted against your words! M1.87
617. Come, teach us some of the wisdom that the Spirit has placed in you
so that through it we might tear down the building of false teaching that the deceitful one built!

⁷⁷ Phil 4:8.

⁷⁸ Prv 25:16, 27.

⁷⁹ Lk 12:47.

⁸⁰ That is, the entire alphabet in Syriac, but in reverse order.

619. Speak in us so that we might tell what is yours to the oppressors,
who have oppressed you very much by the slander of their blasphemies!
621. Rebuke them by the archive of your letters,
and may the false teaching of their minds be revealed by your words!
623. "Every book that the Spirit has written will relate what is yours."⁸¹
The one who dwells upon it acquires the benefit of life through his toil.⁸²
625. It makes the one who learns it complete and whole,
and he becomes fit to serve spiritually.
627. Come, false teachers, see the benefit of the words of the Spirit,
who completes humanity in spiritual matters and grants life.
629. Let us also relate that by which you made your disciple zealous,
for from your childhood books taught you the way of life.
631. Those who hate dwelling upon the words of the Spirit were ashamed and felt humiliated
by the statement of the learned teacher to his disciple.
633. Do not condemn the building of his words treacherously,
for it was armed with the power of the Spirit and built wisely.
635. The Spirit testifies that its building was well fashioned,
and it rebukes the building of the false teaching of your minds.
637. Let the Spirit be an advocate in the dispute between me and you,
and its signal will expose the hidden deceit of your thoughts.
639. May it rebuke you because you oppressed the toil of his love,
for he stood in the battle, was victorious, and conquered for his companions.
641. O stupid ones who are too stupid for simple matters,
what light is there that is as beautiful in its brightness as the name of Paul?
643. What way is there whose course is as easy as his words,
and who is there who has become weary in the path of his kind words?
645. What blessings are not stored up and hidden in his name?
And when someone opened and read Paul, he became rich and was celebrated.

⁸¹ Narsai seems to mark this as a quotation. The reference remains unclear, but compare 2 Tim 3:16 on the inspiration of scripture in Paul.

⁸² Literally: His toil confers the benefit of life on the one who dwells upon it.

647. What medicine is there that is not mingled and mixed in his letters?
And for every pain a remedy is found from his provisions.
649. What order is there that confers life which he did not establish,
and what rank is there that was not aided by his canons?
651. He established laws for youth and for old age,
for servants and free people to be subjected under one lord. Mt.88
653. He confined those of every standing under the canon of his proclamation,
and he brought men with their wives under the yoke of love.
655. He granted victory to the athleticism of the will of the just ones,
and he empowered and supported weakness for those who were overcome.
657. He ordered the steps of the magistracy inside and outside,
and he showed everyone how to pay that which is proper.
659. He brought the world under the gentle yoke of the love of its lord
so that everyone might labor in the field of spiritual life.
661. He chased the darkness of the power of evil away from humanity,
and people made an attack on the light of his proclamation.
663. By the sword of his word, he cut off and cast out the love of money,⁸³
and he showed everyone the bitterness that is hidden in its fruits.
665. By the lance of his love, he tore down the height of the love of glory,
and he humbled pride and arrogance of the soul that accompanies humanity.
667. As for envy, the serpent that spews its bile and slays people,
he cast an arrow of the word of peace at it and its bile lost its flavor.
669. He summoned the angry ones: "Come, be at peace, and cease from anger,
before the sun of life that is temporary sets."⁸⁴
671. He cast fear and judgment before sinners,
and he returned with encouragement: if they are acquitted they will not be found guilty.
673. He revealed the riches of the kindness of the God of all,
which he shows at the end of time to everyone and in everyone.

⁸³ Eph 6:17; 1 Tim 6:10.

⁸⁴ Eph 4:26.

675. "O the depth of the great riches which cannot be contained,
which he provides the world with its inhabitants and it does not decrease!"⁸⁵
677. O the test into which his inquiry enters for the senses and faculties,
and he does not go astray, not even a glance nor a little wink!
679. O the knowledge that confined everyone in ignorance
so that it might grant life to and bring the work of its hands back to life through grace!
681. O mighty one to whom the signal gave the keys of the Spirit,
and he opened the treasury of secrets that were hidden from all!
683. O disciple who has attained the step of a teacher
and has learned and taught the three persons through the study of reading!
685. O one who converted from the law to the kingdom of heaven⁸⁶ Mt.89
and became rich and made the people and the peoples rich from his treasures!
687. In you the power of the parables was accomplished through actions,
for you comprised the riches of the law and the Spirit.

Paul is Worthy of Praise

689. You are worthy of blessing from all our mouths, O preacher,
for you proclaimed the truth and made everyone return to the true piety.
691. May a crown of victory be returned to you from every tongue,
for you taught people to chant glory to the name of the [divine] being!
693. On the path of your words it is proper for all ranks to travel,
for you trod down the way of the resurrection of the body and the freeing of the soul.
695. On the building of your word let the friends of the truth build,
for you constructed and built one confession that cannot be disturbed!
697. Let everyone take aim at your goal in body and soul,
for you were dead to creation and creation was dead to you!
699. You were crucified everyday to the desires as though you were not alive,
and you considered the living world as one that is dead.

⁸⁵ Rom 11:26.

⁸⁶ Literally: the height.

701. Blessed are you Paul, the obedient one, who obeyed and persuaded,
for a crown of victory is preserved for you for the contest of your toils.
703. Make a petition for us, O obedient one, as is your wont,
so that we may be worthy of the mercy when the signal makes you worthy of blessings!

REFRAIN:

Thanks be to the piteous one who teaches the ways of compassion / to those who cherish his justice.

HOMILY 10 'ON STEPHEN'

Introduced and Translated by
Simcha GROSS and Yakir PAZ

The final lines of *Homily 10 'On Stephen'* make clear its *Sitz im Leben*: It was no doubt recited on Stephen's feast day, as the final hemistich implores its auditors "let us strive in prayers on the day of his feast" (ln. 293–294). His feast day was celebrated, according to a variety of traditions, at the end of the month of December.¹ The 26th of December is given in the Syriac *Martyrology* transmitted in ms. Brit. Libr. 12,150 (written in Edessa in 411).² Narsai's *Homily 10 'On Stephen'* was likely recited at a church or martyrion with his relics. This is supported by another of the concluding lines of the homily that references the "treasures of the bones of the upright one" (ln. 289).

There is evidence for a number of churches and martyrion dedicated to Stephen in the Near East.³ According to the *Chronicle of Edessa*, composed in the sixth century, the early fifth-century bishop Rabbula, at the order of the emperor, converted what was previously a Jewish synagogue into a church dedicated to Stephen.⁴ In addition, Jacob of Serugh describes the conversion of a church or martyrion dedicated to Stephen into a fire temple about a year after Narsai's death, after the Persians conquered Amida.⁵

¹ See F. Bovon, "The Dossier of Stephen, the First Martyr," *HTR* 96 (2003): 285–286.

² F. Nau, *Martyrologes et ménologes orientaux, I–XIII. Un martyrologie et douze ménologes syriaques édités et traduits* (PO 10.1; Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1912), 11.

³ For the cult of Stephen in Palestine in particular, see H. Méndez, *The Cult of Stephen in Jerusalem. Inventing a Patron Martyr* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

⁴ Edited with Latin translation in I. Guidi, *Chronica minora* (CSCO 1–2; Paris: Typographeo Reipublicae, 1903), vol. 1 (Syriac), 1–13 (6.1–25); vol. 2 (Latin), 1–11 (at 7). English translation in B. H. Cowper, "Selections from the Syriac. No. I: The Chronicle of Edessa," *Journal of Sacred Literature and Biblical Record* NS V, 9 (1864): 30–39 (34).

⁵ See M. Debié, "Guerres et religions en Mésopotamie du nord dans l'antiquité tardive: Un mimro inédit de Jacques de Saroug sur l'église Saint-Étienne que les Perses ont transformée en temple du feu à Amid (Diyarbakır) en 503 è.c.," *SOPJ* 56 (2018): 29–89, with information about the text in fn. 9 below.

A number of works concerning Stephen were composed or translated into Syriac in Late Antiquity.⁶ By the sixth century, the *Revelation of St. Stephen* was translated from Greek into Syriac. This text purports to give a first-person account by Lucian of the discovery of Stephen's relics in 415 in Kfar Gamla (modern day Beit Jimal) and their subsequent translation to Jerusalem by the order of John, Bishop of Jerusalem.⁷ In addition to being transmitted independently in Syriac, Lucian's text is also incorporated into the *Chronicle* of Pseudo-Zacharias.⁸ Jacob of Serugh dedicated a homily to Stephen, in which he retells the story of Stephen's death at great length, with the Jews serving as the primary antagonists.⁹ About two centuries after Narsai's death, Jacob of Edessa revised Paul of Edessa's Syriac translation of Severus of Antioch's *Hymns*, including two on Stephen.¹⁰

As the proto-martyr, Stephen was invoked as a precursor in various Syriac martyr acts, including, e.g., *The History of Simeon bar Šabbā'ē* and *The Martyrdom of Shamuna, Guria and Habib*.¹¹ In the *History of Simeon bar Šabbā'ē*, for instance, Simeon prays, "Our Lord Jesus — who prayed for his crucifiers and taught us to pray for our enemies, and (who) accepted the spirit of Stephen, his deacon, who prayed for those who stoned him — accept the spirit of these our brothers, and accept my own spirit as well with all of them, your martyrs, who were crowned in the West, and with the holy apostles and blessed prophets."¹²

⁶ An overview of late antique literature on Stephen is offered by Bovon, "The Dossier of Stephen."

⁷ Edited P. Bedjan, *Acta martyrum et sanctorum* (Paris – Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1890–1897), III: 188–199.

⁸ Edited with Latin translation in E. W. Brooks, *Historia ecclesiastica Zachariae Rhetori vulgo adscripta* (CSCO 83–84, 87–88; Paris: Typographeo Reipublicae, 1919, 1921, 1924), 93–103 (Syriac), 65–71 (Latin). An earlier edition is found in J. P. N. Land, *Anecdota Syriaca* (Leiden: Brill, 1862–1875; repr. in 2 vols.; Osnabruck: Biblio-Verlag, 1989), vol. 3, 76–84 (vol. 2.1, 76–84 in reprint). See further references in Bovon, "The Dossier of Stephen," 305–306 and G. Greatrex, R. R. Phenix, C. B. Horn, S. P. Brock, and W. Witakowski, *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Zachariah Rhetor: Church and War in Late Antiquity* (TTH 55; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 81.

⁹ Edited R.-Y. Akhrass and I. Syryany, *160 Unpublished Homilies of Jacob of Serugh* (Damascus: Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate, 2017), I: 44–51. French translation in Debié, "Guerres et religions en Mésopotamie du nord dans l'antiquité tardive," 60–89.

¹⁰ Edited with English translation in E. W. Brooks, *James of Edessa. The Hymns of Severus of Antioch and Others* (PO 6.1, 7.5; Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1911), I: 166–168.

¹¹ The former is edited with English translation in K. Smith, *The Martyrdom and the History of Blessed Simeon bar Šabbā'ē* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2014), and the latter is edited with an English translation in F. C. Burkitt, *Euphemia and the Goth, with the Acts of Martyrdom of the Confessors of Edessa* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1913).

¹² Smith, *The Martyrdom and the History of Blessed Simeon bar Šabbā'ē*, 208–209.

The lengthy opening of *Homily 10 'On Stephen'* (ln. 1–46) is infused with military imagery, in which Stephen — “the first to tread the path of martyrdom of his Lord” (ln. 45) — is depicted as a combatant sent by Jesus to wage war against the Devil and his host, the Jews, the children of Abraham. He is equipped with spiritual weapons and armor such as the sword of the Spirit, the shield of truth, the armor of righteousness, and the helmet of salvation. The martial imagery is picked up again in the concluding section, where the relics of Stephen and his shrine are said to continue to wage war against God’s enemies, with the site of Stephen’s relics depicted as a fortified city, such that they “are unable to approach the walls” (ln. 288).

One of the most remarkable sections in the homily describes the angelification of Stephen (ln. 115–148). The basis for this is the description in Acts 6:15: “All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel” (NIV). Narsai’s pivotal innovation is to link this transformation to the revelation of Jesus which occurs *after* Stephen’s lengthy sermon (Acts 7:55–56): “But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ‘Look’, he said, ‘I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God’.”¹³ Narsai thus changes the order of the scriptural passages. Accordingly, it is the vision of Jesus that causes the transformation of Stephen, described in highly mystical terms, in which the light of the glory of Jesus mixes with the light of the face of Stephen. As a result, Stephen is transformed into an angel while still in his corporal body. Later (ln. 171–184), Narsai extends the angelic imagery to Stephen’s ministry as a deacon. The rank of “the deacons in the holy congregation” is compared to that of the heavenly host, and in particular the Watchers: “a marvelous sight of the likeness of the Watchers in human nature” (ln. 178). By transforming Stephen, the deacon, into a living angel, Narsai bestows upon the clergy, through Stephen, a similar angelic status.

Later Narsai employs the imagery of a vineyard, creatively fusing together in a lengthy section verses and themes from Isaiah 5, Matthew 21, and John 15. The bulk of this section focuses on the image of Jesus as the Vine of Life onto which are grafted those who wish

¹³ It should be noted that Narsai (and similarly Jacob of Serugh) tacitly addresses the problem of the description of Jesus, the Son of Man, standing at the right hand of God, which seems to contradict Psalms 110:1, where the Son is seated to the right of the Father. According to Narsai, Jesus was standing as “one who wanted to come to rescue him from their hands” (ln. 110) and actively engages in the transformation of Stephen.

to be redeemed, while describing the destruction of the evil laborers and the barren vineyard, the Jews. It was by dint of the fact that he grafted himself onto the Vine of Life that Stephen was able to instruct and heal. In the climax, the stoning of Stephen's body is akin to the pounding of grapes and the spilling of his blood to the pouring of wine from the winepress.

An interesting and original idea of Narsai is the comparison between Abel and Stephen (ln. 149–160).¹⁴ What triggers this comparison is Narsai's use of a tradition according to which Cain killed Abel with stones (Gn 4:8 does not divulge the instrument used by Cain to commit fratricide). This tradition is first attested in the Book of Jubilees and later appears also in the Midrash *Genesis Rabba* as well as in the *Cave of Treasures* and other sources.¹⁵ Based on their shared mode of execution, Narsai depicts Abel, the first man to be killed, as a prefiguration of Stephen, the first martyr. Both were killed by their envious brothers — Abel by Cain and Stephen by his brethren Jews. Both Cain and the Jews tried to hide the body under the stones and yet the blood of the slain cried out from the ground. The comparison of the Jews with Cain ensures that they too, like Cain, will be punished and condemned.

Homily 10 'On Stephen' is preserved in more than a dozen manuscripts including the earliest surviving collections of Narsai.¹⁶ It was edited in Mingana 1.90–99, and a facsimile edition of Sn (1901) is also available as Patriarchal Press 1.241–253. The present translation is based on Mingana's edition, with occasional reference to Da (1328).

The Commemoration of Mār Stephen

M1.90

REFRAIN:

Your death is glorified, first-born of the martyrs,
 Stephen, friend of Jesus,
 for you have tread the way for the blessed martyrs,
 so that they may walk after you to the kingdom on high.

¹⁴ For Narsai's treatment of Abel, see also *Homily 49 'On Creation IV'*, 306–417 (ed. Gignoux 210–219).

¹⁵ For references, see fn. 39 below.

¹⁶ See A. M. Butts, K. S. Heal, and S. P. Brock, *Clavis to the Metrical Homilies of Narsai* (CSCO 690; Louvain: Peeters, 2021), 11–12, with literature cited there.

The King Equips Stephen for Battle

1. The King on High, who overcame the Evil One and death by means of the wood,¹⁷ chose a servant and sent him first before his camp.
3. A warrior of the contest went before the camp, and stood between the armies of the King on High and the Enemy.
5. The King sent Stephen before his camp, so that he would be the first to wage war against the Rebellious One.
7. The King sent him in the wondrous rank of the exhorters, so that when the heavenly hosts saw him they would be hastened by him.
9. He anointed him in the Spirit and girded him with weapons so that he would not be vanquished, and before the army of the apostleship he shone in the contest.
11. The King gave him all the warriors' weapons, so that he might make war with the Rebellious One without fear.¹⁸
13. The Divine Will, who sent him, handed to him the sword of the Spirit. so that he might destroy and defeat the evil ones who rebelled against uprightness.
15. Faith — the shield of truth — he held in his hands, and with it he received the sharp arrows of his enemies. M1.91
17. As they were shooting arrows of iniquity in order to deride him, he received them with the shield of hope and was not wounded.
19. He donned the armor of righteousness on his limbs, so that they would not strike him, and he would not become a laughingstock to their forces.
21. He put on the helmet of salvation of life that the King had given him, so that he might protect with it faith, the head of his life.
23. Everything was girded by that faith, and there was in it no place stripped of uprightness.
25. He considered faith the head of his life, and with the helmet he covered it so that they might not strike it.

¹⁷ That is: the cross.

¹⁸ The following description of the armor of God is based on Eph 6:13–17. Cf. Is 59:17; Wis 5:18–20; 1 Th 5:8.

27. The King admonished and commanded him and his compatriots,
"Be as serpents in your cunning."¹⁹
29. The serpent is wise in protecting itself from being struck,
for as long as its head is alive, it is not damaged from strikes.
31. In this way it is right that you should guard faith,
for as long as it is protected you should not fear harm."
33. The strong servant held to this command,
and just like a head he guarded it so that it would not be wounded.
35. Just like a shield, he held faith in his hand,
and the preparation of the gospel he strapped on his feet.²⁰
37. He rode upon the Word of holiness as if upon a horse,
and upon the humility of righteousness — swift-winged.
39. He rode upon the Word, held a sword, and wore truth,
and he put on a helmet and strapped on his feet the readiness of his Lord.
41. He cried out in the camp of the Enemy like a commander,
and they began to tremble at his voice which was like thunder.
43. The King sent him before the troops of the heavenly hosts,
to tread a path for his comrades so that they might become like him.
45. He was the first to tread the path of martyrdom of his Lord,
and he was the first-born martyr of Jesus, the King on High.

The Sons of Abraham Battle Stephen

47. The forces of the Chief of the Air²¹ were tormented,
for they saw the warrior mocking them.
49. They saw that they were weakened by the battle against his army,
and they hired and brought the sons of Abraham²² to be alongside them.

MI.92

¹⁹ Mt 10:16.

²⁰ Eph 6:14–17.

²¹ That is: Satan.

²² The text reads 'Abram' here, but Narsai oscillates between Abram and Abraham throughout this passage depending on metrical requirements.

51. The sons of Abraham and the forces of the Evil One became a single army,
so that they might vanquish Stephen, the servant of truth.
53. The sons of Abraham hired themselves to the enemy,
and received future judgment as the wage of their hiring.
55. Through the Hebrews, the Evil One waged war against the servant,
just as he had waged war through their leaders against the King.
57. "Stephen was full of power and grace,
and he made signs in the land of Judea.
59. The people of the evil²³ synagogue of the Libertines rose up,
as well as the Cyrenians with their companions, to argue with him.
61. The haters of truth were unable, not even a bit,
to withstand the Spirit with which he spoke."²⁴
63. They were convicted by the words of the good servant, while being ashamed,
and behold, their guilt is proclaimed through all generations.
65. In their impudence they sent men and instructed them to say,
"We have heard him blaspheme with his words against God and against the king."²⁵
67. They seized him and brought him into the midst of the assembly of evil doers,
in order to kill him as one who had blasphemed against God.²⁶
69. With the arrows of his words, the martyr of Jesus beat them,
the children of Abraham who were not the heirs of Abraham's hope.
71. Of the election of Abraham, whom the Divine Will chose from among the Babylonians,²⁷
the upright one told the sons of Abraham that he would shame them:
73. "The Divine Will chose the children of Abraham from among all the peoples,
and honored them through its friendship above all people.
75. It did not allow people to oppress them or harm them,
and it rescued them from the Egyptians and the Babylonians.

²³ Added by Narsai to the biblical quotation.

²⁴ Acts 6:8–10.

²⁵ Acts 6:11.

²⁶ Acts 6:12.

²⁷ Acts 7:2.

77. Stiff-necked and uncircumcised in their hearts,
you were against it and against the Holy Spirit from it.²⁸
79. The jealousy of your thought is like that of your ancestors,
for they persecuted the upright and killed the righteous whom the Divine Will sent.²⁹ Mt.93
81. With these words he struck them as with a staff,
and confirmed their irreconcilable bitterness.
83. The gall of anger spread in their hearts,
and they were unable to persevere against the sharp arrows of his words.
85. The good servant condemned the servants of the Evil One,
and they were embittered that they had taken the side of guilt.

Stephen is Stoned

87. They advanced quickly in anger, having been found guilty by uprightness,
and they seized him and took him outside the city and stoned him.³⁰
89. They could not endure the love of the word of the athlete of truth,
and they saw a pretext to make him die a temporal death.
91. The victorious one died a temporal death, not an eternal one,
and because of this he received death while rejoicing.
93. He learned from his Master who had overcome death and had broken its sting,³¹
and because of this he scoffed at it and did not fear.
95. Concerning the ones who stoned him, he entreated the Lord who had chosen him,
that he not hold against them this sin that they were committing against him.³²
97. The servant of truth imitated the Lord of All,
who entreated his Father to forgive his crucifiers.

²⁸ In the biblical verses, the pronouns refer to God, but it seems best here in Narsai to keep the reference to the Divine Will.

²⁹ Acts 7:51–52.

³⁰ Acts 7:57–59.

³¹ 1 Cor 15:54–56.

³² Acts 7:60.

- 99. The servants of wickedness arranged their ranks as for war,
and instead of weapons they armed themselves with stones and rocks.
- 101. The strong servant was not weakened by their evil,
and he was not weary from the battle against wickedness.

Revelation and the Transformation of Stephen's Appearance

- 103. The King who chose him encouraged him so that he not be weak,
and opened before him the veil on high to further encourage him.
- 105. Through a revelation, he saw the heavens opened,
and he saw Jesus standing on the right.³³
- 107. The excellent martyr saw Christ standing,
standing as someone who wants to go down to him.
- 109. In this form, Christ revealed himself,
as one who wants to come to rescue him from their hands.
- 111. The athlete saw the ineffable love of Jesus,
for he did not show himself as sitting but as standing.³⁴
- 113. This is the posture of those who are concerned about their beloved ones,
who do not consent to neglect them when they are oppressed.
- 115. The friend of the King was beaten by the impudent,
and the King saw his friend struck, and he revealed himself. Mt.94
- 117. He revealed himself through a revelation to his beloved friend,
and his countenance shone like the face of an angel of light.³⁵
- 119. The athlete saw the light of his glory in the midst of the contest,
and his eyes shone to observe the Kingdom on High.
- 121. The friend of Jesus was observing the Kingdom on High,
and because of this he scorned and disdained every suffering.

³³ Acts 7:55–56.

³⁴ Ps 110:1.

³⁵ Acts 6:15.

123. The light of the splendor of Jesus poured over his face,
and his own light mixed with the splendor of his face.
125. The light of his face mixed with the splendor of the light of Jesus,
and the light of the glory of our Lord and his own became one.
127. Christ on high and Stephen among the earthly inhabitants,
and the glory of his Lord on high and his own that is below became one.
129. He was not like his Master in ineffable brilliance,
He gave him a portion from His glory, and he came to be in glory.
131. The King on High dresses his servants on high with glory,
but he dressed Stephen with glory while on earth.
133. While on earth He gave him the glory of the immortal ones,
to confirm what will occur at the end:
135. "When our despicable body is transformed," said Paul,
"He will make it like the brilliance of the body of His glory."³⁶
137. In this manner, He also did now to Stephen,
whose face He glorified while on earth with His splendor.
139. O, the wonder that was revealed in Stephen,
who scoffed at death and derided it with his words,
141. Who is the mortal who has ever seen his face exulted,
as Stephen was exulted while he was dying?
143. Who is the servant whose face shone in a time of distress,
if not this servant of truth who is worthy of this?
145. Who has seen arms lifted up with stones in them,
and his face has shone, and he has amazed those who have come to kill him?
147. Everyone saw him, as it is written, the entire synagogue,³⁷
and they marveled at the appearance of his face, "What is this?"

³⁶ Phil 3:21.

³⁷ Acts 7:57.

Stephen as Abel, Deacon, and Angel

149. Against his face, the servants of iniquity were embittered,
and they rained down upon him stones as on Abel.³⁸
151. Envy pelted him with stones of anger, as with Abel,
and the blood of the athlete screamed out in truth more than with Abel.³⁹
153. The envy of his brother wickedly pelted Abel,
and so too for Stephen, his brothers wickedly stoned him.
155. They mustered upon the victorious one a dark cloud of stones of anger,
and they buried him under them as with Abel, whom Cain killed.
157. Cain killed his brother Abel and buried him with stones,
and he placed over him a heap of stones, so that he would not be discovered.
159. They also acted similarly against the innocent one,
and like Cain they are hereafter awaiting the recompense of (their) wage.
161. Woe to the upright one, who was not buried in honor,
for his pure body was mutilated by a heap of stones.
163. Woe to you, head who was consecrated by the laying on of hands,
for you wear a crown of stones in wickedness through wickedness.
165. He was consecrated by the laying on of hands of apostleship,
and in their boldness the wicked ones covered him with stones.
167. The Spirit hovered and sanctified him by its power of inspiration,⁴⁰
and the wicked ones sprinkled his body with his own blood.

³⁸ According to some traditions, Cain killed Abel with stones; see Jubilees 4:31 (ed. J. VanderKam, *The Book of Jubilees* [CSCO 510–511; Louvain: Peeters, 1989]); *Genesis Rabbah* 22:8 (ed. J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck, *Bereschit Rabba: Critical Edition with Notes and Commentary* [2nd revised ed.; Jerusalem: Wahrmann Books, 1965], 224); Targum Ps.-Jonathan to Genesis 4:8; Cave of Treasures 5:29 (ed. S.-M. Ri, *La caverne des trésors* [CSCO 486–487; Louvain: Peeters, 1987]). For Narsai's treatment of Abel, see also *Homily 49 'On Creation IV'*, 306–417 (ed. Gignoux 210–219).

³⁹ Gn 4:10.

⁴⁰ Syriac *maggnānutā*, for which, see S. P. Brock, "Maggnānutā: A Technical Term in East Syrian Spirituality and its Background," in *Mélanges Antoine Guillaumont. Contributions à l'étude des christianismes orientaux* (Cahiers d'Orientalisme 20; Genève: Patrick Cramer, 1988), 121–129, esp. 128. See also Lk 1:35.

169. The blessed army of apostleship laid on its hands,
and determined that he shall consecrate the sacraments.
171. He was a deacon of the awesome and divine sacraments,
and by his ministry he represented a type of angelhood.
173. The deacons in the holy congregation acquire this type,
resembling through their ministry the heavenly hosts.
175. The athlete acquired this rank in the present life,
the rank and appearance to become in truth a Watcher of flesh.
177. The nature of flesh and the countenance of fire were visible,
a marvelous sight that resembles the Watchers in human nature.
179. Because of this his Lord honored him with the splendor of the Watchers,
so that when he is resurrected he will be in the glory that resembles theirs.
181. The body of the sons of light resembles the body of our Lord,
by that way of life through which mortality is exalted.
183. The doers of wickedness were not afraid of the light of his face,
audaciously, in their daring, they stoned the upright one.

M1.96

The Vineyard and the Vine

185. The evil slaves who were in the vineyard of my beloved,⁴¹
saw the branches that were sprouting in the vine and pruned it in anger.
187. The audacious ones saw the branch that brings forth good fruits,
and at once they pruned it so that it would not bear sweet fruits.
189. The vineyard of my beloved is the people of the house of Israel,
and the evil slaves are the heirs who scorned the master of the vineyard.⁴²
191. The master of the vineyard sent his son to gather the fruits,⁴³
and they seized him, took him out of the vineyard, and killed him in wickedness.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Is 5:1.

⁴² Mt 21:33–46; Mk 12:1–12; Lk 20:9–19. For Narsai's treatment of the parable of the vineyard, see also his *Homily 47 'On the Workers in the Vineyard'* (ed. Siman 61–80).

⁴³ Mt 21:37.

⁴⁴ Mt 21:39.

193. The wicked passed true judgement when asked,
 "What should the master of the vineyard do to those slaves?"⁴⁵
195. They replied, "Let him destroy those slaves harshly,⁴⁶
 because they struck his slaves, caused distress to his servants, and killed his son."⁴⁷
197. Even the creator, who saw that the vineyard did not give fruit,⁴⁸
 destroyed its hedge, uprooted its tower, and blocked its irrigation.
199. He blocked the prophecy from which they drank the draught of the Spirit,
 as well as the care of His guardianship which had surrounded it.
201. He uprooted the tower, the holy temple, which he built within it,
 in which they crushed mute sacrifices, according to the law.
203. He took one vine from the species of this vineyard,
 and abandoned the rest of it to bear brambles and thorns.⁴⁹
205. The Creator took a vine of life from that vineyard,
 so that anyone who wants may graft himself onto the life that is from it.
207. The Vine of Life came about in the creation — the first of our species,
 so that with the sweetness of the wine of his love he may intoxicate his servants. Mt.97
209. "I am the true vine," he said, "and you the branches,"⁵⁰
 and I placed you in the world so that you might go and bring forth fruits of glory.
211. The Father is the worker of this vineyard,
 and He has removed every branch on which fruit is not found.
213. See that you do not desist from producing good fruit,
 lest you burn like branches that burn in the fire.
215. They immediately gather and throw a dry branch in the fire;
 so also it will be for you if you do not keep loving me.
217. I am the vine, and you the branches, and my Father the worker.
 Bring forth fruit and give thanks so that you are not cut off."

⁴⁵ Mt 21:40.

⁴⁶ Mt 21:41.

⁴⁷ Mt 21:35.

⁴⁸ Is 5:2; Mt 21:33.

⁴⁹ Is 5:6.

⁵⁰ Here begins an extended meditation on Jn 15:1–8 that continues through line 218.

219. These things the good master said to the slaves whom he had chosen,
and he warned them not to stray from his love.
221. In him they too planted their love truly,
like a branch whose root is placed in the vine.
223. From its life flowed life to their planting,
and they drank from the water of its holiness.
225. Their height rose over all the peoples of the earth,
and they protected them from the disease of mortality.
227. They beat the shadows in every corner of the ends of the earth,
and they saved them from the flame of sinfulness.
229. They gleaned all the sweet clusters of grapes of their way of life,
and everyone ate, and his palate, which had been bitter, was sweetened.
231. Everyone's palate had been bitter from the poison of death,
and they sweetened it with the good hope of the resurrection of the dead.
233. He taught them about resurrection so that they might declare in the world,
that everyone will rise from the dead, just as he arose.
235. On this vine, like his companions, the chosen one was planted,
and the doers of evil cut him off with the sickle of their audacity.
237. He grafted himself to this vine with great love,
and he bore fruits and sprouted leaves for the healing of humanity.
239. In the likeness of food, he fed them instruction,
and he healed them from their pains with the power of the Spirit.
241. The draught of life supplied him with fruits like his companions,
and his leaves flourished in a great indescribable wonder.⁵¹ Mt.98
243. The grape cluster of his soul was full of the wine of the love of Jesus,
and the worthless haters saw his beauty and were embittered.
245. They became angels of the Adversary,⁵² the hater of humanity,
and they mustered a cloud of wrath and hail of stones upon him.

⁵¹ Jer 17:8.

⁵² Mt 25:41.

247. With a hail of stones they pounded that sweet fruit,
so that those thirsting for the draught would not be delighted⁵³ by his sweetness.
249. They placed the upright one in the winepress of envy,
and they pressed him with the heels of dispute.
251. They poured out his blood like wine in the winepress,
and they crushed his body under stones like pomace.⁵⁴

The Model of Christ

253. As they carried the stones of wrath, which they hurled upon him,
the blood of Christ was not washed from their hands.
255. The blood of the savior defiled their fingertips,
as they hurled at him the stones of wickedness with their hands.
257. Like wolves they assaulted the shepherd and tore apart his body,
and they directed their vehemence against the exalted one, in order to subdue him.
259. The impure were not sated from shedding the Lord's blood,
and they further sought to shed the blood of his beloved friend.
261. They were bloodied by the drops of the Lord's blood,
as they went to subdue the beloved lamb.
263. The night wolves were intoxicated beyond measure from the blood,
and their ferocity was more bitter than wolves.
265. They received upon themselves and their children the blood of the Lord,⁵⁵
and they are stained with it forever without end.
267. The evil ones mixed the blood of the servant with the blood of the Lord,
and they took upon themselves the admonition for their guilt.

⁵³ Reading *neṭbassmun* 'they shall be delighted', following Da (1328), instead of *neṭbasbas* 'he shall be plucked' as found in Cb (1705), Va (1868), Br (1881), Ki (1881), Vb (1883), La (1887), Vc (1890), and Sn (1901), as well as in Mingana's edition.

⁵⁴ On this word, see A. M. Butts, "Syriac *samminē* (PL) 'pomace (?)' and an Akkadian Cognate," *Aramaic Studies* 20.1 (2022): 36–43.

⁵⁵ Mt 27:25.

269. The blood of the holy one poured forth like (that of) his Lord,
so that he would be with his Lord in the glory of the Kingdom on High.

Mt.99

Call for Commemoration

271. Whenever the evil wickedness of the wicked ones chances upon us,
let us call upon him to rescue us from the wicked ones.
273. Whoever is oppressed and takes refuge in him with love and hope
will no longer be subdued by the wicked ones who wrong him.
275. Let whoever is persecuted by the Adversary, the hater of humanity,
take shelter in him,⁵⁶ and he shall⁵⁷ flee from him like smoke.⁵⁸
277. He chased away the rebellious demons in the temporal life,
and now in his death they tremble even more by the power of his army.
279. In the temporal life they were unable to look at him,
and now in his death they cannot even enter his monastery.
281. But if they enter in fear, they enter rashly,
for they proclaim their guilt by their fear.
283. The rebellious are truly filled with shaking and fear,
when they see the monastery of the upright one even from afar.
285. A durable city that is not subdued by the enemy,
the convent of the upright one is impressed on their hearts when they see it.
287. They stand in the distance on the top of mountains and observe it,
because they are unable to approach its walls.
289. A force departs from the treasures of the bones of the upright one,
and they see him as the commander and flee.
291. Come, let us strive on the day of the memorial of the splendid martyr,
so that he may help us not to be harmed by the Rebellious One.
293. Come, let us strive in prayers on the day of his feast,
so that we may be with him in the Kingdom on High in the promised blessings.

⁵⁶ That is: Stephen.

⁵⁷ That is: Adversary.

⁵⁸ Ps 68:2–3.

HOMILY 5

‘ON MARY’

Introduced and Translated by
Erin Galgay WALSH

Homily 5 ‘On Mary’ focuses upon soteriological and Christological themes central to Narsai’s theological vision. The transmission history of the homily along with its doctrinal themes have led to the composition’s association with the Christmas season.¹

In the introductory verses, Narsai sketches the events of Genesis 1, highlighting the creation of humanity and the divine plan for restoration through the Incarnation.² He affirms that the created order points to God’s existence while the creation of humanity reveals the mystery of the divine persons (ln. 17–18). The dynamic between divine hiddenness and revelation forms a consistent thread throughout the homily. Occasionally, Narsai pauses to explicate specific verses or terms which contribute to his didactic aims. For example, he meditates upon the significance of Genesis 1:26 (“Let *us* make humankind”), lingering upon the referent of the plural pronoun. Further on, the poet explains how humanity can bear the divine image which permits no limit or composition, identifying common misunderstandings to avoid. Narsai emphasizes that only through love do humans bear a likeness to God (ln. 133). The homily, punctuated with frequent moments of direct address, displays Narsai’s engaging rhetorical style.

The divinely ordained order soon goes awry through human folly and Satan’s unbri-dled envy. Narsai frames God’s response to humanity’s original transgression as a balance of severe punishment and abiding mercy.³ Successive generations of the righteous bear

¹ C. Payngot, “The Homily of Narsai on the Virgin Mary,” *The Harp* 13 (2000): 33.

² An outline and partial Italian translation may be found in P. T. Mingana, “*E saranno benedetti nel tuo seme tutti i popoli della terra*”: *Uno studio di Pshiṭta Gn 22, 15–18 nell’esegesi di Mar Narsai* (Rome: Pontificia Universitas Urbaniana, Facoltà de Teologia, 2003), 194.

³ For a broader overview of Narsai’s understanding of original sin within the larger context of Syriac literature, see L. Van Rompay, “Humanity’s Sin in Paradise. Ephrem, Jacob of Sarug, and Narsai in Conversation,”

the “leaven of life,” culminating in Mary who brings the “promise of life” to its full conclusion (ln. 188). Narsai invokes maritime imagery to describe Mary as a “harbor” and a “vessel” (ln. 189–192). Consistent with references to Mary elsewhere in this homily, as well as in a *soḡyā* attributed to him, Narsai underscores Mary’s receptivity rather than her agency.⁴ Within a series of interlocking couplets, Narsai juxtaposes the creation of the original Adam from the earth with the fashioning of the second Adam from the womb of Mary. These references to Mary, embedded within Narsai’s teaching, contribute to our understanding of her role in his broader corpus.⁵

With painstaking precision Narsai espouses his Christological position, and he emphasizes that the “Will of the Hidden One” indwelt in the visible body through love (ln. 249–250). While remaining distinct, the Son of God forms one *prosopon* with the revealed son (or the son of humanity) (ln. 301–302). In swiftly flowing verses, Narsai alludes to several Gospel episodes as he extols the humanity of the revealed son.

This homily contains clear articulations of the relationship of the human and divine natures in Christ and echoes teachings found elsewhere in his oeuvre. A fruitful comparison may be made with *Homily 81 ‘On the Word became Flesh’* (ed. Patriarchal Press 2.206–218). While *Homily 81* focuses on different biblical passages, namely John 1:1 and 1:14, Narsai is similarly concerned there to preserve the humanity of Christ and refute opponents who would attribute divine origin to his flesh. Both homilies provide evidence for Theodore of Mopsuestia’s influence upon Narsai’s thought as well as the poet’s distinctive pedagogical and interpretative style.⁶ The present homily features more extensive portions of direct address than *Homily 81*. While not naming Cyril and his followers by name, Narsai attributes their positions to unspecified heretics who also misrepresent his views. He proclaims that such heretics will one day be compelled to “confess the two forms of truth: the form of a slave and of the Maker, one *prosopon*” (ln. 506). Anchoring his

in G. A. Kiraz (ed.), *Jacob of Sarug and his Times. Studies in Sixth-Century Syriac Christianity* (GECS 8; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010), 199–217.

⁴ E. Muehlberger, “Extraordinary Conceptions: Insemination and Theories of Reproduction in Narsai’s Thought,” in A. M. Butts, K. S. Heal, and R. A. Kitchen (eds.), *Narsai: Rethinking his Work and his World* (STAC 121; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 175–185.

⁵ P. Krüger, “Das Bild der Gottesmutter bei dem Syrer Narsai,” *Ostkirchliche Studien* 2 (1953): 110–120. Krüger does not cite this homily in his study, relying heavily on the limited number of homilies in Mingana’s edition and *soḡyā* of questionable authenticity. His comparative study provides preliminary insights into the larger context for Narsai’s thought by considering the positions of Nestorius and Jacob of Serugh.

⁶ J. Frishman, “Narsai’s Christology according to his Homily ‘On the Word Became Flesh,’” *The Harp* 8/9 (1995–1996): 289–303.

argumentation in Philippians 2:7, Narsai lambasts his opponents for their lack of precision. Narsai's opprobrium of his foes blends with soaring praise for the divine Craftsman who brought together two natures without compromise or mixture.

Mēmṛā 5 'On Mary' is preserved in more than a dozen manuscripts including the earliest surviving collections of Narsai.⁷ The text is most readily available in the facsimile edition of Sn (1901) as Patriarchal Press 1.104–128. The present translation is based on this facsimile edition.

The Commemoration of Our blessed Lady Mary

Pl.104

REFRAIN:

Praise to the Good One who while not in need, clothed himself with the needy one so that through him he might enrich all.

The Creation of the First Adam

1. The greatness of his love the Creator wished to reveal through a human, Pl.105
and He gave forth to the heavenly ones the utterance: "Let us make humankind."⁸
3. He created everything from nothing, and He did not consult;
and with regard to the human being, He said, "Come, let us make humankind in our image."⁹
5. He made the spiritual beings,¹⁰ yet He did not want to reveal the image of his (divine) Essence,
and at the constitution of contemptible dust He uncovered his hiddenness.¹¹
7. In the constitution of all He sought neither help nor a counselor,
and in the case of dust more contemptible than everything (He sought) help and counsel.

⁷ See A. M. Butts, K. S. Heal, and S. P. Brock, *Clavis to the Metrical Homilies of Narsai* (CSCO 690; Louvain: Peeters, 2021), 6–7, with literature cited there.

⁸ Gn 1:26.

⁹ Gn 1:26.

¹⁰ That is: the angels.

¹¹ Gn 2:7.

9. He made the creation into what it was without calling it his image,
and He took up from it a hidden portion and called it his image.¹²
11. In wisdom He did what He did wisely,
so that by (wisdom) He would give the work of his hands the wisdom to know his name.
13. He wanted to reveal the name of his being¹³ in the image of humanity
(namely,) that while He is one, there are with him beings¹⁴ that are equal.
15. As in a symbol He revealed to his creatures the power of his hiddenness,
and that which could not (be revealed) He showed to them in a revealed image.
17. Only *that* He is He taught the world by means of his creations,
and *how* He is He did not wish to reveal until (the creation of) humanity.
19. Until the end of his work He saved the mystery of the disclosure of the (divine) persons,
and He taught all the power of his (divine) Essence and the Powers that are with him.
21. In front of all He gave forth that utterance: "Let us make humankind,"
and the powers on high marveled at it (wondering) what it was and about whom.
23. In great wonder the spiritual ones stood when they paid heed and listened to it,
and at its newness they marveled without satiation.
25. What is this new (thing) that the Hidden Nature proclaimed?
And whom did He call as an aid for him in the constitution of his image?¹⁵
27. With whom does He take counsel before making the image of his (divine) Essence?
And how is it possible that the work of his hands would resemble him?
29. Who is there with him who possesses creative power,
whom He summons towards the constitution of the image of his image?
31. It seems that He is with his (divine) Essence in a different world
and if not, what is it that was said, "Come, let us make"?
33. Had He said "Come," (singular) it would have been addressed to one person,
now that He said "Come," (plural) it should be thought that there are two.

Pt.106

¹² Here Narsai rehearses the creation of humanity from the dust of the earth (the "hidden portion") infused with his image.

¹³ That is: essence.

¹⁴ Syriac *qnomē*, which could also be translated as "hypostases," refers to the persons of the Trinity.

¹⁵ Here and in the lines that follow, Narsai meditates on the significance of the plural first person verb in Gn 1:26.

- 35. What I have said, the spiritual ones did not learn it openly,
they only pondered what the meaning would be that was hidden in what they heard.
- 37. They only heard it in (their) mind symbolically,
not being able to precisely grasp the exact power of its significance.
- 39. This alone the Creator wanted to let them know,
that there is with him something that is hidden with his hiddenness.
- 41. He revealed the mystery to them, not the proper explanation of that mystery,
so that when it would be revealed it would not be considered strange before their eyes.
- 43. Because of them God uttered a sound without words,
and with (a view to) teaching them He extended his work over six days.¹⁶
- 45. In six days He completed his creation and sealed his words,
and on the seventh (day) He rested although He did not rest because he did not toil.¹⁷
- 47. And on the sixth day He spoke those words, "Come let us make,"
and He made the image, and He bound in it all rational and irrational beings.¹⁸

The Intent of the Creator and the Envy of Satan

- 49. With a body and a soul He put together and fashioned (the human being) skillfully, Pl.107
so that He would resemble both heavenly and earthly beings.
- 51. As an image He placed him in the world, the royal city,
for the rational and irrational beings to look at lovingly.
- 53. As an oven He built the simple one¹⁹ for the testing of all
that He might test in its heat the discernment that He placed in the rational beings.
- 55. In a pleasing place He introduced and placed him to make all envious of him,²⁰
in order to see who rejoices in loving him and (who) grieves at his (high) rank.

¹⁶ Theodore and Narsai imagine God's actions toward all creation — including humanity — as pedagogical.

¹⁷ Gn 2:2.

¹⁸ Compare Theodore of Mopsuestia, *In Genesim*, ed. E. Sachau, *Theodori Mopsuesteni Fragmenta Syriaca* (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1869), 7 (Syriac), 5 (Latin translation).

¹⁹ The "simple one" refers to the human who is composite (but simple).

²⁰ Gn 2:15.

57. The multitudes on high He tested by means of the honor given to the one (made from) dust,
and He found out from some of them that the gold of their minds was deceitful.
59. He issued a boundary for (the human) while He knew that he would not keep it,²¹
so that through it He would reveal the (human's) inclination²² and the will of the Evil One.²³
61. From one fruit of a tree He forbade him access;
and as soon as the Evil One became aware of it, he became envious, deceived him, and made
[him a laughing stock.
63. Envy blinded the discernment of the Chief of the Air,²⁴
and he did not want to see the pleasing beauty in the image of humanity.
65. Troubled by envy, the Envious One, did not become envious of the human being,
but rather of the (divine) Being for having named humanity by the image of his image.
67. The Rebel became envious presumptuously of the hidden Being,
and because he was not able to harm the (divine) Being, he harmed his image.
69. As a spy the Deceiver came to the innocent one,
and he plundered his riches, stripped him, and left him naked.
71. By shaming him he supposed that he had shamed the name of the Creator,
and the one blinded by envy did not know that he would do evil to himself.
73. As at an image of the King of kings he was throwing words at him, Pl.108
and instead of stones, he hurled at him words of dishonor.
75. "In envy," he said, "the Creator held you back from the tree,
that you would not become heir of his divinity.
77. The tree which He withheld from you possesses divinity,
and if you eat, lo you become a god like gods."²⁵
79. These words the Evil One hurled at the image of the Good One,
and he destroyed, hurled, derided him, and laughed at his fall.

²¹ Gn 2:16–17.

²² Within the writings of Narsai, the Syriac term *yasrā* "inclination" signifies the stirrings within the individual. While *yasrā* may be used for inclination toward the good, it frequently appears with a negative valence. This term offers critical insight into the poet's theological anthropology. See A. H. Becker, "The 'Evil Inclination' of the Jews: The Syriac *Yatsra* in Narsai's Metrical Homilies for Lent," *JQR* 106.2 (2016): 179–207.

²³ That is: Satan.

²⁴ That is: Satan.

²⁵ Gn 3:1–5.

The Response of the Creator: Punishment and Mercy

81. The Good One full of grace looked at this derision,
and He had mercy upon his image that it might not be scoffed at by the rebellious ones.
83. He punished (him) because he went astray, and then again He had pity on him with mercy,
so that the Hateful One might not boast because he cast (the image) down harshly.
85. He issued a threat that was full of death on account of his transgression,
and yet He made his body a source that let life flow to his race.
87. Streams of people flowed from his body to the four corners of the world,
and he filled the earth (with) the rational fruits that are from his limbs.
89. Living fruits came forth from the one who was killed by food;
and the Hateful One saw (it) and terror seized him about his transformation.
91. He thought that if he would eat from the tree, he would die forever,
and the Good One did not want (Satan's) desire to increase until completion.
93. And the medicine of life taken from Life He placed within his body,
so that it would run along with his propagation without end.
95. In his offspring He propagated and kept the name²⁶ that He gave him,
so that the name of his greatness would not disappear from his descendants.
97. The name of his greatness He depicted upon the tablet of the fashioning of humans,²⁷ Pt.109
and the Evil One erased it, after He depicted it again in Seth for the second time.²⁸
99. About Seth He said that in everything he resembled Adam;²⁹
because in his body was hidden the mystery of the propagation of his race.
101. He did not call Cain and Abel the image of Adam,
for one would die and the other would perish in the judgment.
103. In the third one that Adam begot, life came to dwell,
and fittingly the son of Amram³⁰ also called him the image of Adam.

²⁶ The name God gives to the human is "image of God."

²⁷ Alternatively: humanity's fashioning.

²⁸ Gn 4:25.

²⁹ Gn 5:3.

³⁰ That is: Moses.

- 105. The image of Adam was going to receive the Lord of Adam,³¹
and in anticipation He placed (the image) from the beginning in Adam and his sons.
- 107. Just like a foundation He placed his name in the building of humanity,
that they would build one upon the other the image of the One who would come.
- 109. On this agreement did He consult (when saying) “Let us make man,”
and in this order He called him the image of his (divine) Essence.

The Image of the (divine) Essence

- 111. One from humanity was going to make a dwelling-place for his love,
and in anticipation He called the constitution of humanity the image of his hiddenness.
- 113. From the beginning He placed upon humanity the name of his (divine) Essence,
that there would not be doubt when He would accomplish it in fact.
- 115. Until the end of times what He did was kept in store,
and in anticipation He performed it symbolically until He would accomplish it.
- 117. And if not, let everyone who speaks against my words
say in what regard the human image resembles divinity?
- 119. How is it possible that the nature of the Hidden One who is without composition
has resemblance in the thick nature (of humans) which possesses composition?
- 121. How can something created become like its Creator?
And how is something limited sufficient for one without limit? Pl.110
- 123. How can we believe that a human is the image of the divinity?
For behold, the divinity has no limit or composition.
- 125. Assuming that he became the image of the hiddenness as it is written,
how did it happen that — behold! — he was destroyed and returned to his earth?
- 127. And behold death destroyed all generations and time and again they are destroyed;
Where is the image? For its resemblance is not found among humans.

³¹ This sentence may be understood either as “The image of Adam (i.e., Seth) was going to assume the Lord of Adam (i.e., God or Christ)” or “The Lord of Adam was going to assume (i.e., in the Incarnation) the image of Adam.”

129. And if someone would say that it will happen when he is renewed,
behold, even then he cannot resemble divinity.
131. No, man,³² the (divine) Essence does not have a visible image;
nor is it possible for created things to resemble the One to whom there is no likeness.³³
133. Through love alone is it possible for humans to resemble the Hidden One,
and through love the Maker also allows his own³⁴ to resemble what is his.³⁵
135. In love He called the human image the image of his (divine) Essence,
and through grace He called him with names that transcend him.
137. Through grace He granted him from the beginning of time the name of his (divine) Essence,
to depict the mystery of that which will happen in later times.
139. In later times He did confirm the name of the image;
therefore, He depicted in advance types (pointing) to future things.

The Transmission of the Mystery

141. By giving this name He was watchful from the beginning,
and based on this expectation He elevated (humanity's) fashioning.
143. Because of this He chose one people from the peoples,
and He separated it from all so that the leaven of life might be preserved in it.
145. Because of this He honored the righteous ones one after another,
that they might guard the mystery that is hidden in their limbs.
147. On this condition the righteous ones also agreed with one another;
and they handed down and transmitted the leaven in them from one to another.
149. Adam gave it to Seth who was called by the name of the image,
and from Seth to Enoch and Lamech and Noah (who) was pleasing to God.³⁶
151. Noah prophesized and gave it to his son through blessings:
"Blessed is the Lord, the God of Shem," who reconciled us with him.³⁷

PL.III

³² Here Narsai addresses his imaginary opponent.

³³ Narsai's vocabulary provides an allusion to the "image and likeness" of Gn 1:26.

³⁴ That is: the human creature.

³⁵ That is: his divinity.

³⁶ Gn 4:17; 5:25, 28-31.

³⁷ Gn 9:26.

153. And from Shem it continued through the line of descent towards Abraham,
and Abram guarded it diligently more than anyone else.
155. Even the Creator who saw that he was committed to keep his image,
selected him, and established him as a steward over the treasure of his name.³⁸
157. In him He wanted to reveal the great riches that He had placed in his forefathers,
and in him He promised to bless everyone in the seed from him.
159. With his offspring He established a great covenant that will not be falsified,
and He sealed it and gave it by means of an oath that will not be dissolved.
161. This is the reason of the election of Abram and his progeny;
that he would guard the treasure of life until it is revealed.³⁹
163. And if not, let the son of Abraham, the hater of the peoples, say:⁴⁰
Why did the Creator choose him above all the others?
165. Why did He give to him only the life-giving Law,
and (why) did He deprive the peoples from the benefit that is hidden in it?
167. If all of the race of Adam is his,
why does He choose one and reject the other in partiality?
169. It is partiality that He elevates the one and lowers the other;
and it is not justice that while they are one they are not one? Pl.II2
171. If He is the Creator, and both the people and the peoples are his,
why is his creation not equal as He is one and the same?
173. There seems to be no fairness in the election of the people
if it is not possible for the peoples to enjoy his goodness.
175. No, son of Abraham, do not divide the equality of our race;
and do not throw division between us and our Creator.
177. As for your election the cause is that the treasure of life is placed in it;
allow our mortality to be resurrected by the life that is from you!
179. For the life of humanity the Creator chose you and placed life within you;
why does it grieve you that humans live by the life force of your life?

³⁸ Gn 12:1–3; 13:14–16.

³⁹ Heb 6:13–17.

⁴⁰ Here Narsai is referring to his Jewish contemporaries as the son of Abraham who hates the “peoples.”

181. On account of all the election of Abram and his sons took place,⁴¹
so that as guides they might show humanity the way towards life.
183. Life is hidden in that way of life according to the Law,
and it is transmitted from the one to the other secretly.

Mary and the Creation of the Second Adam

185. From Abraham proceeded the promise, and it resided with David,
and from the house of David it led and reached until Mary.⁴²
187. In Mary the promise of life⁴³ concluded the course of its path;
and in her limbs it entered, came to rest, and resided as in a harbor.
189. And the daughter of man came to be the harbor of peace for human nature,
and no longer did the heavy waves of mortality shake her.
191. As a vessel she bore within her womb all our race;
and she carried it forth and placed it on the shore of the sea of the kingdom on high.
193. One spiritual being descended from on high from the Hidden One;⁴⁴ Pl.113
and He directed her to run swiftly toward the region on high.
195. A new message He cast down in the ears of the daughter of mortal ones;
she greatly wondered at the newness of the voice that was speaking with her.
197. A new conception without marriage did the Watcher⁴⁵ announce;⁴⁶
and she received it in faith without hesitation.⁴⁷
199. In faith Mary consented to the celestial being,
as the earth consented in the beginning to the voice of the Creator.

⁴¹ Rom 5:11.

⁴² Mt 1:16.

⁴³ The "promise of life" refers to God's original pledge to Abraham.

⁴⁴ Lk 1:26.

⁴⁵ I have rendered the term (*'irā*, plural *'irē*) as "Watcher," but this term may also be translated as "angel."

⁴⁶ Lk 1:28–33.

⁴⁷ Lk 1:38.

201. That commandment which nodded to the earth whereupon it conceived Adam,
that (same commandment) depicted the second Adam in the earth of her body's womb.
203. That Craftsman who took the dust without hands;⁴⁸
He fashioned in her a body that resembles that first (body).
205. That (divine) Essence that breathed in Adam the spirit of life,
that (very Essence) created the soul that is akin to that one in the beginning.
207. In a new way that resembles Adam('s fashioning) He fashioned (the second) Adam,⁴⁹
so that Adam would resemble Adam in all the aspects of Adam.
209. His Will took from the same Adamite dust
and fashioned and made him⁵⁰ skillfully with body and soul.
211. The image of that image which death corrupted He renewed by his hand,
and in the same way He depicted it on the bodily tablet.
213. His Hint mixed the medicine of life with its images,
so that it would be able to give life in dead bodies.
215. As a temple did He build it⁵¹ to be a dwelling place for his divinity,
so that He might receive by it the worship of all from all created things.
217. From all created things He made a mixture in the dust from which he was fashioned, Pl.II.4
so that in it He might bind all with the peace that the transgression of the commandment
[dissolved.
219. The rational and the mute beings He held together within the boundary of his body and soul,
that they might behold him as an image possessing all forms.

Reconciliation through the Son

221. As a dwelling place of love He made him for himself and for all,⁵²
so that the rational beings might dwell in him in love, and He (might dwell in it) according
[to (his) will.

⁴⁸ Gn 2:7.

⁴⁹ Rom 5:12–21; 1 Cor 15:22.

⁵⁰ That is: the second Adam.

⁵¹ That is: the humanity of Christ which would assume the Divinity.

⁵² Jn 15:9–10.

223. He revealed his divinity to his creatures in what He did,
so that they would aim at that correct mark of the revelation of the divine persons.⁵³
225. The divine persons who are with him, hidden in him, He pointed out through him;
and just as with a finger He showed them by the way He was composed.
227. He proclaimed his secret begetting through the earth of his novel conception,
and He taught that He does have a Son who is equal with his (divine) essence.⁵⁴
229. And with the name of Son He called the second Adam his Son,⁵⁵
so that He would prepare the way of Fatherhood and Sonship.
231. "Son of the One on high" the Watcher also called him when He was announced,⁵⁶
in order to reveal by his name that Son who cannot be investigated.
233. To the lofty condition of the "Word of the Father" He was going to ascend,
and beforehand He depicted his condition by his name, before it really happened.
235. One with the Son (who is) without beginning, He was going to be,
and He placed upon his head the name of his (divine) Essence in the likeness of a crown.
237. A crown and a condition He gave in grace to the Son of the mortal ones,
and in godly fashion He exalted his conception and his begetting.
239. On account of all He chose him from all as a beginning,
in order to reconcile in him⁵⁷ all with him⁵⁸ and with all.⁵⁹
241. As a cause of peace He summoned him, and He set him between himself and humanity, Pl.115
so that he might bring peace to the brokenness of peace by the peace of his name.
243. Peace also Gabriel gave to his mother at his conception,
and he summoned and called the power of the most High to descend on her.⁶⁰
245. The spirit and the power together resided with his bearer,
and they put into effect in him the great name that is with the Son of the Hidden One.

⁵³ The term *qnomē* refers to the persons of the Trinity.

⁵⁴ Jn 17:6–8.

⁵⁵ Mk 1:9–11; Mt 3:13–17; Lk 3:21–23; Jn 1:29–33.

⁵⁶ Lk 1:32.

⁵⁷ That is: in Christ.

⁵⁸ That is: God.

⁵⁹ 2 Cor 5:18–19.

⁶⁰ Lk 1:26–28.

The Will of the Hidden One

247. It is not the Son of the Hidden One that came to a bodily birth;⁶¹
(but) rather the son of the daughter of man to whom the Will of the Hidden one descended.
249. The Will of the Hidden One descended from on high, not the hiddenness (itself),
and it dwelt in the belly not by nature but by love.
251. His Will descended in order to depict the bodily image,
not to depict his divine being, which is eternal.
253. In order to sow life in mortality He resided in another,
not to exhaust the source of life by means of (his) creation.
255. And if not, how is it possible for him to become what He (already) is,
without being deprived of what He is and still remains.
257. A new becoming would be an entire dissolving of that first station,
for it is not possible that, while being fashioned, He would remain as He was.
259. The Son of the Father is a (divine) Being, without time,
and if He came to a second birth, He would cease from being what He is.
261. He is without composition and without limit as his Father,
and if He would be confined in a womb of flesh, He would become like everyone.
263. All which belongs to the Father belongs to him also, without beginning,
and if He were fashioned (in the womb) by the Holy Spirit, He would be entirely a creature.
265. Say that the spirit fashioned in the womb the one who was in a womb, Pl.116
(but) if this is so, He is a creature (and) thus not a Creator.
267. No, man, there is no human who makes himself;⁶²
and no equal being able to depict him as the rest.
269. For a nature that is everlasting it is impossible to become again;
neither is it possible for an unlimited (nature) to put a limit on his unlimitedness.
271. As for me, far be it from me to say that the (divine) Being received becoming,
and God forbid that I would believe that flesh confined the All-Powerful one.

⁶¹ As Narsai's opponents might claim.

⁶² Although Narsai does not specify his opponent here, it seem that he is addressing a view he deems erroneous.

273. I do not accept something which is hard to be accepted,
and I do not consent to that which cannot be agreed upon (namely) the creation of the
[Hidden One.
275. I do not believe that to the One who is without a beginning there was a beginning,
neither that the One who creates all created himself carnally.
277. His Hint created the flesh in the fleshly womb,
that He might renew by it the flesh which had grown old with mortality.
279. He fashioned the flesh in a new way without marriage,
and He filled it with spirit in order to beget humanity spiritually.
281. By the power of the spirit He completed the conception and his begetting,
and He made holy the holy temple for the Will of his love.
283. From the beginning of his fashioning love dwelt in him,
and it⁶³ did not separate from him, and never again will it separate or be removed (from him).
285. The Will which depicted him in the womb traveled with him,
and with the power of his power He overcame all powers and ruled over all.
287. One, I say, is He and the power that operated in him everything,
one, not "like one," when I would be mixing the separate natures.
289. One do I call the Will of the Hidden One and the visible body,
and while it is so, I do not mingle the hidden with the revealed. Pl.117
291. It does not escape me that that there is a distinction between the one and the other,
as much as the created nature is inferior to the Creator.
293. I do not disturb the correct order of the nature of the Hidden One,
and I do not dissolve the natural aspects of the visible body.
295. The Hidden One is the Hidden One — however many corporeal things you may mix;
and the body is the body — however many spiritual things you may mingle.
297. The Hidden One is not mingled with the body except in love,
and what is revealed is not mixed with what is hidden except in name.
299. In name (only) is it possible to call them one in essence;
as long as the one who calls (them such) does not overlook their distinctions.

⁶³ That is: love.

301. On this condition I have also called the two “one love”:
the Son of God and the son of humanity “one *prosopon*.”
303. The Son of God found pleasure by his will in the son of humanity,
and He gave him what was his own, and took what belonged to (the human Christ), (however)
[not by nature.
305. By (the divine Son’s) own generation without beginning He honored (the human Christ’s)
and by his power without end He exalted the (human Christ’s) rank. [birth,
307. By the lofty status of his Divinity He called him and appointed him
to take the place of the Hidden One for the work of his hands.

The Revealed Son

309. Instead of his hiddenness there was the revelation of the revealed image,
in order that by his revelation He might proclaim the power that is hidden from all.
311. As a trumpet the revealed son cried out to the created (humans)
about that Son who was begotten from eternity without beginning.
313. His is the conception and his is the bodily birth,⁶⁴ Pl.118
while the Word of the Father takes part in his bodily aspects.
315. His is the conception, his is the birth, and his is the circumcision,⁶⁵
and He is the one who offered sacrifices to the Hidden One on behalf of his creation.⁶⁶
317. He suckled milk, and knees bore him, and the mouth kissed (him),
and it is He who crawled with children on the streets.
319. He grew up gradually little by little,
and He received again the power of wisdom by the power of the spirit.⁶⁷
321. He completed the requirements of the Law of the Spirit for thirty years
and He repaid the debt to the God of all and reconciled all.
323. It is He who was baptized by John as one lacking,⁶⁸
and the preacher buried his limbs in the grave of water.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ In this and the following verses, Narsai turns to focus on the humanity of Christ.

⁶⁵ Lk 2:21.

⁶⁶ Lk 2:22–40.

⁶⁷ Lk 2:52.

⁶⁸ Mt 3:13–17; Mk 1:9–11; Lk 3:21–22; Jn 1:29–34.

⁶⁹ Col 2:12–13.

325. It is He who received the power of the Spirit in the sign of the dove,
and about him the voice of the Father testified that his love was true.⁷⁰
327. He fasted and hungered according to what nature required of him;
it is He who engaged in a contest in the desert with the Strong One.
329. His the hunger, his the thirst, and his the sleep,
and He grew tired, sat down, and asked for water to quench his thirst.⁷¹
331. His is the visible body that received pains;
his is the soul that bore the weight of discernment.
333. His the trepidation, his the sweat, and his the prayer;⁷²
and He was strengthened by the Spiritual One so that He would not weaken.
335. He was in the upper room,⁷³ He was at the court, and He was at Golgotha;⁷⁴
and it is He who received dirty spittle from the mouth of the dirty ones.⁷⁵
337. His the cross, his the nails, and his the spear,⁷⁶
and it is he who inclined his head upon the wood and surrendered his spirit.⁷⁷
339. It is his body which was in the grave for three days;
it is his soul which went to Eden and returned to him.
341. It is He who laid among the dead ones without harm,
and He was raised by the power of the Creator which was hidden in him.
343. In him was hidden the great power of the Word of the Father,
and by the power of his power he became strong enough to resist his pains.
345. In him the Word of the Father dwelled willingly,⁷⁸
and while (the Word) was hidden in him, it did not partake in his weaknesses.
347. (The Word was) in him fully from when the Watcher announced to his mother;
(it was) in him willingly, while it cannot be explained how and how much.
349. (It was) in him before (his) passion and after (his passion), without going away;
(it was) in him upon the earth and in him in heaven, without end.

Pl.119

⁷⁰ Mt 3:16–17; Mk 1:10–11; Lk 3:22.

⁷¹ Jn 4:7.

⁷² Mk 14:32–42; Mt 26:36–46; Lk 22:39–46.

⁷³ That is: for the Last Supper.

⁷⁴ Mt 27:33; Mk 15:22; Lk 23:33; Jn 19:17.

⁷⁵ Mt 26:67.

⁷⁶ Jn 19:34.

⁷⁷ Mt 27:50; Mk 15:37; Lk 23:46; Jn 19:30.

⁷⁸ Here begins a reflection on the implications of the prologue of John's Gospel.

Refutation of his Opponents

351. I am not saying that the power of the (divine) Essence left him,
neither (while He was) in the body, nor when He had stripped off the mortal (nature).
353. One with the (divine) Essence I reckon (him) because of his rank,
and I call one Son of God him and the Word.
355. I do not say two, as the heretic says;⁷⁹
I say one, however much (the heretic) accuses (me) falsely.
357. No, false accuser, do not accuse me as is your habit,
you did not hear from me that God has a son and (another) son.
359. No, insolent one, do not blame me insolently,
You did not see me walking off the road.⁸⁰
361. No, disputer, do not quarrel against my words;
you never watched me forsake (my) duty. Pt.120
363. No, false one, do not denounce me before the false ones;
I have not tested you whether the witness of your words is acceptable.
365. What do you have against me, (you) blind with jealousy without understanding,
that you quarreled with no reason with my words as if this was justified?
367. What do I have with you, mad man full of dispute,
that you stir up arguments in anger in order to contend with me.
369. I appeal to you, the Hidden One who in his love dwelt in our visible body,
rebuke the insolent ones who revile you with (attributing to you) the capability of suffering.
371. Please, your (divine) Essence, Being that is without beginning,
silence the voices that confine you within a fleshly womb.
373. Because of you the disputers dispute with us,
because we call you by the living name which is fitting to your name.
375. Concerning your life force they are upset all the time (wanting) to let it die,
and while this is not possible, lo they let you die with false arguments.

⁷⁹ Here and in the verses that follow Narsai rehearses the charges made against him by an unspecified heretic, namely that he proclaims two sons. It is reasonable to suspect Cyril of Alexandria as the unnamed heretic since Narsai quotes him regularly.

⁸⁰ Denying charges of heterodoxy, Narsai uses the image of the road to affirm his orthodox beliefs.

377. Your death they very much desire, those dead through iniquity,
and they do not understand that your nature is above (any) harm.
379. Why do you, ones full of anger, want to kill the Living One?
For behold, there is no way that life (itself) loses its life.
381. Why do you tire yourselves to enclose the spirit within limbs?
For behold, the heavens and the earth are not able to contain it.
383. Why do you hate whomever says that the (divine) Being did not die?
For behold, whether (such a person) says it or not, the (divine Being) does not die.
385. Why do you detest the One who lifted up the lowliness of our body?
For behold, whether He exalts it or not, in glory He rules. Pl.121
387. What do you gain by letting die the Immortal One?
And what do you lose by letting our body triumph along with the (divine) Essence?
389. Why is it not clear that the (divine) Being is above (all) harm?
And who does not know that suffering and death belong to the mortal one?
391. And for sure if the dumb (creatures) would obtain mouths to speak,
they would join us in (confessing) that the (divine) Being did not die.
393. Perhaps, if discernment were to be found in those undiscerning ones,
they would despise whoever subjects to suffering the nature of the Hidden One.
395. Come Silent Ones, deliver a righteous judgment with regard to those querulous ones,
who conceal revealed truth under foolish speech.
397. Be ashamed and show reverence, even a little, you who possess reason,
and stop contemplating the passibility of the Impassible One.
399. Be silent, do not shout insolently against the (divine) Essence,
lest you become the devil's companions in the judgement.
401. The zeal of your thoughts resembles (that of) the Accuser,
who in the semblance of love reviles also the venerable name.
403. Why do you become companions to the Evil One, (you) deprived of intellect?
And (why) do you estrange yourselves from the good things (that are) without end.
405. Flee, O miserable ones, from intermingling with the killer of humanity,
and come, take refuge in Life that is hidden in faith.

Exhortation to Correct Belief

407. Let us believe that the (divine) Being, his Will, donned a body which is from us,
and (that) He perfected it in suffering and through it granted life to humanity.
409. As a cause of life He took it from us as a beginning, Pl.122
and He called it by his name that He might give through his name life to all.
411. Through the human being which (He took) from us the Will of the Hidden One gave life
and He is the man who died and was raised, and lived and gave us life.⁸¹ [to (all),
413. He is the one who loosened the bonds of Sheol from the deceased ones,
and went out and proclaimed the new message of the resurrection of the dead.⁸²
415. He died and lived by the power of life which dwelt in him,
and while He was in death, the life force of his life (was) above death.
417. That Will which accompanied him did not leave him,
and He didn't give up assisting him in the time of (his) passion.
419. (The Will was) with him in the judgment, with him on the wood (of the cross), and with him
and while it was with him, (the Will) did not partake in his weaknesses. [in the tomb,
421. The nature of the mortal one received within its own the things belonging to his nature
and the nature of the Hidden One remained within its own, without change.
423. He did not change — and again I say that He did not change;
and if someone is angry, he will again be angry (hearing me say:) He did not change,
425. What did change was the nature of humanity, the receiver of life,
which stripped off its sufferings and put on the glory of the immortal ones.
427. It was a mortal one who died upon the cross, separate from the Word;
and through the power of the Word He overcame death and distributed life.
429. He was a mortal one, and again I say that He was a mortal one,
and while this is so, I (still) call him and the Word one.
431. He in his nature bore lowly things which were natural to him,
and while being tested, He learned how to aid those who are being tested.

⁸¹ Jn 20:31.

⁸² Acts 2:24.

433. By means of his victory He gave victory to our defeat,
and through his perseverance He wove for our nature a crown of glory. Pl.123
435. With great glory the Power which dwelt in him crowned him,
and He summoned and called Watchers and humans that they would glorify him.⁸³
437. To Watchers and humans He showed his glory and the greatness of his rank,
and He gathered them that they might watch him on the day of his ascension.
439. For forty days He left him upon the earth after He was resurrected,
so that in his bodily existence He might reassure his doubting race.⁸⁴
441. For the reassurance of his race He showed in his body the nails and the spear,
and He ate and drank after He had become immortal.⁸⁵
443. By all these things He fully realized the hidden power that was dwelling in him,
and after this had been accomplished, (God) raised him upon high above all.
445. Very glorious was the day of his ascension more than all (other) days,
and splendid was the path that He tread towards the height.
447. In multitudes upon multitudes the spiritual beings stood to observe him,
for how did the body fly up in the air, which is not usual?⁸⁶
449. Watchers and humans saw something new in the Chief of Humanity⁸⁷
for He opened the gates that were closed for humanity.
451. The gaze of all was fixed upon him spiritually
until He arrived at that place where there is no possibility for sight.
453. The Hidden Hint removed from before him the veil on high,
and He came and watched that creation that had not seen corruption.
455. He entered the great and perfect abode to minister,
and no longer does He surrender the greatness of his rank after a time.⁸⁸
457. With the (divine) Essence He seized power without end,
and forever and ever his scepter rules over all and in all. Pl.124

⁸³ Phil 2:10; Rom 14:11.

⁸⁴ Literally: doubts of his race.

⁸⁵ Through partaking in human activities such as eating and drinking, Jesus reveals how the two natures coexist fully.

⁸⁶ Lk 24:51-52.

⁸⁷ 1 Cor 11:3.

⁸⁸ Here Narsai underscores the singularity of the Incarnation.

Praise for the Incarnation

459. Who will not marvel at the greatness of divine love?
For He made us heirs along with him in his glory and his power.
461. Who would not confess the confession of the true faith which is incomprehensible,
for He lifted up and placed the work of his hands alongside his own greatness.
463. Who would not glorify the craftsmanship of the power of the Creator,
who bound together the world into one human and called him by his own name.
465. One Creator expressed his Will in the form of an image⁸⁹
and He raised him up and placed him above all that He might judge all.
467. As a mirror He placed him on high above all,
so that in his exposure they might see the beauty of the hiddenness of the Hidden One.
469. In his physicality He wanted to show his love to all,
so that they would not trouble themselves by pursuing inquiries about his hiddenness.
471. In him He stopped everyone from investigating that which is not to be investigated,
and towards him He turned the gaze of all that they might not again go astray.
473. In that creature⁹⁰ He made his body a second sun,
so that it might fulfill the role of light and the role of eyes.
475. He is all light for all who consider his brightness,
and any luminary is considered as nothing compared to his light.
477. Within the sphere of his body is hidden the Will that selected him among all,
and He made him beautiful to see among all seeing.
479. True wisdom emanates from him like rays,
and it gives wisdom to all by that knowledge which cannot be comprehended.
481. It is not (worldly) wisdom that the greatest of the teachers teaches there; Pl.125
To (his) disciples He gives rest from (their) labor so they would not be in doubt.
483. In the harbor of life He settles humans and spiritual beings,
and they no longer meditate upon those things at which they toiled for a length of time.

⁸⁹ The scribe deleted the phrase “in his nature” (*bakṃyānēh*).

⁹⁰ That is: Christ.

485. With him⁹¹ the course of words and of actions comes to rest,
and there is no one asking "what is this?" and "why?".
487. No one seeks where the Hidden One is, who cannot be investigated,
for (all) investigation concerning him is erased from (their) mind.
489. There⁹² no creature is able to say about its Creator
that the door of (God's) Will is shut in front of him, without any change (possible).
491. One⁹³ is (no longer) in doubt as to how (the Creator) is and that He is hidden from all,
for love brings to rest the inclination, which no (longer) doubts.
493. Through what is visible (every human) sees the Hidden One, not through (direct) sight,
and by it the desire of his soul is fulfilled, without lack.
495. There that which is written, that He is the image of humanity, comes to fulfillment,
for in him⁹⁴ the image of the (divine) Essence is disclosed to the eye of all creatures.
497. There He becomes Lord for all in reality,
and He rules over all and subjugates (all) under his power.⁹⁵
499. There devils are put to shame who scorned his authority,
and they bow down (in) genuflection and sanctify him, (even) while they are unwilling.
501. There rival factions of heretics perish,
and they no longer err in (their) lack of knowledge concerning passibility.
503. There the war ceases that they⁹⁶ prepared against the Hidden One,
and there the fighting that they lined up against the Revealed One comes to a rest.
505. There they confess the two forms of truth:
the form of a slave and of the Maker, one *prosopon*.⁹⁷
507. One *prosopon* all tongues confess there,
and one sanctification they recite there for the Word and the body.

⁹¹ That is: Christ.

⁹² The location referenced here seems to be heaven where God divinizes Christ. For Narsai, such a place is ideal as previous lines suggest.

⁹³ That is: every human or creature.

⁹⁴ That is: Christ.

⁹⁵ Phil 2:10; Rom 14:11.

⁹⁶ That is: the heretics.

⁹⁷ Phil 2:7.

509. The Hidden One and the Revealed One they worship at once in one equality,
while they understand that they are two, proclaimed (as) one.
511. A great wonder they see there by means of their worship,
in that along with the Creator a creature receives the worship of all.
513. (This is) worthy of wonder, and the world is too small to marvel at it,
at how creation worships itself in the temple of the body.
515. Who is able to look at this accurately,
and who is able to say how big and what (exactly) its meaning⁹⁸ is?

Creation Reflects the Wisdom of the Craftsman

517. The power of the (divine) Essence is able alone to say how much it is,
and (this power alone) knows how (God) operated it⁹⁹ wisely.
519. This craftsmanship is indeed his craftsmanship,
of that craftsman who created the creation skillfully.
521. Skillfully He fashioned it and carried it out, according to his intention,
and perhaps from eternity He contemplated (it) and then carried it out.
523. He accomplished it at the end, while He knew it from the beginning,
and He saw it before it came into existence as if it already had come into existence.
525. At the end of times He accomplished his will, the One who is perfect in his (divine) Essence,
and He poured his love upon all and in all abundantly.
527. The great riches of his divinity He revealed to his creatures,
and He appointed a human to administer his own through his own.
529. He selected one ruler from humanity in accordance with his will, Pl.127
and He sealed him with his name, and gave him his rank for him to rule and judge.
531. In the place of his love He summoned him and established him before his works
that he would occupy the role of the One who is not visible.
533. A human filled the place of the (divine) Being for humanity and angels,
and by the sight of his body, sight finds rest and searching ceases.

⁹⁸ That is: its power.

⁹⁹ Namely: the wonderful work of the two natures in one.

535. This is the cause of his high rank and authority:
that He (should) proclaim the power of hiddenness by means of openness.
537. The two causes are hidden in his name and exceedingly honored;
one (cause) of the (divine) Essence and one (cause) of love towards all.
539. It was not possible for creatures to see the secret Being,
and He comforted them with the revealed sight that they might not be troubled.
541. Again they were deprived of divine authority,
and He devised an unspeakable plan and made them his associates.
543. The cause of our life is very great and cannot be understood,
and however much we speak, we are incapable to say how big it is.
545. Heaven and earth, if there would be mouths (speaking) for them,
would not have the power to narrate how big it is.
547. And while the cause of our life is exceedingly great and cannot be understood,
the quarrelsome ones did not even consider it to be something.

Final Rebuke of the Heretics

549. The iniquity (is) upon you, heretics — as much as you acted iniquitously!
For you denied goodness, the beneficence of which is without comparison.
551. You, madmen, then, who are not placated in (your) controversy,
why are you destroying the great height of the building of truth?
553. Therefore, deceitful ones, who are even more deceitful than evil people,
why do you tear apart the essence¹⁰⁰ of the humanity and the divinity? Pl.128
555. Divinity wanted to honor humanity in (Divinity's) own domain,¹⁰¹
for you, is it from the Evil One that humans became the sons of God?
557. (The divine) Being associated the nature of humans in the greatness of its rank,
for you, why is it hard to be associated with grace (which is given) freely?

¹⁰⁰ The language of "essence" is almost exclusively used in reference to the divine, but in this instance, it applies to humanity as well.

¹⁰¹ That is: what belongs to Divinity.

559. Quarrelsome ones, cease from (your) fight against this (belief),
and observe and consider that Watchers and humans marvel at it.
561. They saw the greatness of the celestial beings which they praised,
and they did not cease and will not cease to sing praises for how glorious it is.
563. It has worked out beautifully that humans became divine,
and no one has the power to render thanks to the One who made it so.
565. In a beautiful way created nature has come to rule along with its Creator,
while there is no one among creatures who is able to utter blame (saying:) "Why is this so?".
567. You then, heretic, with a deficient mind, do not blame
that (divine) Essence that did so well everything it did.
569. Come, if you wish, praise and glorify, with all created beings,
that Craftsman who allowed his work to share in his greatness.

REFRAIN:

Praise to you from all mouths, the one extolling our race in his grace.

HOMILY 12
'ON THE EVIL OF THE TIME'

Introduced and Translated by

Lucas VAN ROMPAY

Homily 12 'On the Evil of the Time' decries the overwhelming presence of evil in the world. Human iniquity, instigated by Satan, has grown exponentially. Due to humanity's stubbornness, Divine punishment, intended to correct this situation, has done little to redress the outright corruption of the created order. On a cosmic scale, a vicious circle of degradation appears unchecked. The poet's despair over depravity's grip on the world runs so deep that he hardly sees any room for hope or any possibility of repentance.

While Narsai takes his lead from human history as described in the Bible and fully recognizes the role of God (often described as "the Hint") as Creator, Teacher, and Judge, his description of humanity does not draw any distinction between the Old Testament Israelites and his contemporaries, neither between Jews and Christians, nor between orthodox and heretics. These distinctions, regularly found in Narsai's other homilies, are notably absent from the present homily.

In light of this ahistorical and undifferentiated description of the etiology and consequences of human evil, the appearance of three peoples "who are even worse than we are" (ln. 585) in the final section of the homily comes as a surprise. These groups, namely the Arabs (called Hagarenes and Ishmaelites), the Kedeshtes, and the Ṭemurites,¹ were present around the Roman-Persian frontier and in the region of Nisibis at the end of the fifth century. These allusions, placed at the very end of the homily, suggest that the experience of warfare and unrest caused by the invasions of these peoples formed the background for the text's composition. At the same time, this historical reference gives us a rare clue for dating the homily to the last years of Narsai's life (d. ca. 500). His old age, confronted with these new threats, may help explain some of the despair and bitterness.

¹ For references, see the notes to the translation.

In several of his homilies, Narsai grapples with what he perceives as widespread evil in the world. He remains convinced that humans were created good and that sin is the result of free will, driven by humans' inclination, their *yaṣrā*.² The picture is not uniformly bleak across Narsai's oeuvre. Even after the sin of the first human couple and the ensuing deterioration of human nature, God — as a diligent Teacher and a caring Father — is still committed to leading humanity throughout history into a better world, inaugurated by his Son. Resigned to the fact that “humans are unable not to sin,”³ Narsai believes that, with the help of God's mercy, they can overcome their weakness, turn their inclination to the practice of good, and “break the chain that iniquity has thrown on their neck.”⁴ In the present homily, however, there is no call for repentance and no plea for divine grace. With very few exceptions,⁵ no comfort is provided by Narsai's otherwise rich theology of salvation.

A homily of a comparable dark tone is *Homily 25 'On Reproof'*.⁶ Both homilies share evil as a common theme and, as Corrie Molenberg has observed with regard to *Homily 25 'On Reproof'*, these works reflect Narsai's disposition as “tired and disappointed.”⁷ In *Homily 25 'On Reproof'*, however, Narsai brings up different categories of people, in particular the Jews, the Manichaeans, the Marcionites, the Arians, and the Magi, not in order to portray them as opponents of Christianity — as one would expect — but to praise them! Even while their teachings are wrongheaded, they are committed to the commandments of their religion far more than Christians are. They can serve, therefore, for Christians as examples to follow! Such a rhetorical use of Christianity's traditional opponents does not have its parallel in the present homily. The three historic peoples mentioned at the end of the present homily commit evil in their own distinct ways. In the case of the Arabs, Narsai argues vigorously against the notion that their evil, through their ancestor Ishmael, casts any blame on Abraham, “a lover of mankind and lover of his Lord” (ln. 559). As all humans, including “us,” these three peoples — outsiders to Narsai's world — chose to be evil by their own free will.

² See A. H. Becker, “The ‘Evil Inclination’ of the Jews: The Syriac Yatsra in Narsai's Metrical Homilies for Lent,” *JQR* 106.2 (2016): 179–207.

³ *Homily 15 'On Reproof'* (ed. Mingana I.166).

⁴ *Homily 15 'On Reproof'* (ed. Mingana I.167).

⁵ See notes 85 and 104.

⁶ Ed. Mingana I.210–222.

⁷ C. Molenberg, “As if from another World. Narsai's Memra ‘Bad is the time’,” in H. L. J. Vanstiphout (ed.), *All those Nations... Cultural Encounters within and with the Near East. Studies presented to Han Drijvers at the occasion of his sixty-fifth birthday* (Groningen: Styx Publications, 1999), 101.

Homily 12 'On the Iniquity of the World', as well as *Homily 25 'On Reproof'*, was assigned in the later liturgical tradition to the period of *Bā'utā* ("rogation" or "supplication"), the three-week period prior to the beginning of Lent, which commemorates the end of a plague under Catholicos Ḥazqiel (d. 580/81).⁸ *Bā'utā* and Lent are periods of repentance and self-reflection.⁹ Narsai's powerful description of evil in our world must have impressed upon the audience an urgent awareness of human weakness and failure, as a basis for much needed repentance. This is indeed an important component of Syriac liturgical tradition, well into the modern period.¹⁰ Regardless of the specific personal or historical context in which the present homily originated in the late fifth century, the transmission of this work within the liturgy provides a context which somewhat mitigates the unusual harshness of Narsai's words.

Homily 12 'On the Iniquity of the World' is preserved only in nineteenth- and twentieth-century manuscripts though it may have been found in Ua (1715).¹¹ It was edited in Mingana 1.100–117. The present translation is based on Mingana's edition, which has been compared with Sn (1901) (= Patriarchal Press 2.654–679). Reference has also regularly been made to Lb (1893), Ld (1896), and Te (1896). Variants between these witnesses are very rare; when they occur, they are mentioned in the footnotes to the translation.¹²

⁸ See J. Mateos, *Lelya – Šapra. Essai d'interprétation des matines chaldéennes* (OCA 156; Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1959), 147–149. For the West-Syriac equivalent (in particular the three days of the "Fast of the Ninevites" in the first week), see A. Baumstark, *Festbrevier und Kirchenjahr der syrischen Jakobiten* (Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des Altertums, 3.3–5; Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 1910), 191–194.

⁹ For a brief analysis of Narsai's six homilies on Lent, see Becker, "The 'Evil Inclination' of the Jews," 184–197.

¹⁰ See, e.g., the *dorekta* "On the Sin of Man" by Israel of Alqosh (ca. 1600) in A. Mengozzi, *Israel of Alqosh and Joseph of Telkepe. A Story in Truthful Language. Religious Poems in Vernacular Syriac (North Iraq, 17th century)* (CSCO 589–590; Louvain: Peeters, 2002), 23–41 (text) and 151–162 (transl.). Even though this poem is based primarily on the *Apocalypse of Paul*, it has ideas and expressions in common with the present homily.

¹¹ See A. M. Butts, K. S. Heal, and S. P. Brock, *Clavis to the Metrical Homilies of Narsai* (CSCO 690; Louvain: Peeters, 2021), 14, with literature cited there.

¹² For assistance with the translation as well as with the introduction, I would like to thank Erin Galgay Walsh and Aaron Butts.

On the Evil of the Time — Appropriate for Bāʾutā

ML100

First overview: Divine punishment and the irrational human response

1. I will recount the harshness of the plagues that have scourged our earth;
come, inhabitants of the earth, listen and lament at how much we have been scourged.
3. We have been scourged greatly according to the measure of our evil which has grown greatly;
and perhaps in no generation plagues have been as great as in our generation.
5. In our generation, that scriptural word said about the Hebrews has come to fulfilment:
“I struck them and they were unwilling to accept ways of correction.”¹³
7. With all his punishments, the Creator punished us wisely,
and our mind, lacking in understanding, failed to consider the severity of his plagues.
9. He punished us out of love, as a father punishes his children;
yet, our evil inclination¹⁴ did not like his loving punishment.
11. Our nature was engaged savagely in shameful things,
and was unwilling to accept the gentle yoke of service to its Master.
13. As with a yoke our soul was reined in by its Creator,
and it panicked, kicked, and broke the yoke of the command of his words.
15. In a beastly way the beast of our discernment¹⁵ proceeded,
and (even) more than a beast it gnawed at the words of those giving it instruction.
17. Like dogs our thoughts barked at our shepherds,
and our mind could not distinguish the master of the house from a stranger.
19. A dog distinguishes the sight of its master and wags its tail at him,
yet, our heart did not distinguish, and still does not distinguish, the things that are right.
21. Because we didn’t make that distinction (as we should have done) as discerning and rational
the One who gave us rationality raised his hand and beat us severely. [beings,

¹³ Jer 2:30.

¹⁴ Syriac *yaṣrā*, which Narsai uses for the mechanism that regulates human freewill. While it has the potential of choosing either good or evil, so often in human history it commits itself to evil. For the origin of the term and its use in Narsai, see Becker, “The ‘Evil Inclination’.”

¹⁵ On the gift of “discernment” (*pāroṣutā*), which may be weakened or lost and may need to be reawakened, see C. E. Morrison, “The Faculty of Discernment in Narsai,” in A. M. Butts, K. S. Heal, and R. A. Kitchen (eds.), *Narsai: Rethinking his Work and his World* (STAC 121; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 163–175.

23. Severely did he scourge us, the Commander¹⁶ whose commandment is right, and he carefully exposed our shameful behavior. Mt.101

Sin and punishment as a cosmic spectacle

25. Through the plagues that we suffered he depicted the evil inclination inside our soul, and He revealed and displayed it to the eyes of earthly and heavenly beings.
27. Heaven and earth became the spectators of our shameful behavior, and through our punishment they learned about our hidden iniquity.
29. Both the rational and dumb beings openly looked at the harshness of our punishment, and as on a scale they weighed our iniquity (measuring) how iniquitous it was.
31. The punishment in our day has become like a mirror,¹⁷ and the evil of our shameful deeds is far greater than the plagues we suffer.
33. Our evil deeds have become immeasurably larger than our plagues, and (yet) our sluggish heart¹⁸ did not consider the heaviness of our iniquity.

Human stubbornness, arrogance, and incomprehension

35. Because we failed to arrive at (self-)reflection, as would be fitting for intelligent people, the plagues goaded us like an animal deprived of understanding.
37. The Divine Hint¹⁹ goaded us like an animal, and what the Wise Man had said came to fulfilment with us:
39. "With a stick and a goad the wise chastised foolish pride,"²⁰ and he uttered the same threat for the irrational and rational beings.

¹⁶ Literally: the Commandment.

¹⁷ For the image of the mirror in Narsai, see K. Heal, "Narsai and the Scriptural Self," in Butts, Heal, and Kitchen (eds.), *Narsai: Rethinking his Work and his World*, 133–143 (140–142).

¹⁸ Literally: our heart, heavy of heart (*lebban yaqqir lebbā*). The phrase "heavy of heart" is used in the Syro-Hexapla of Prv 12:8 to render ὀλιγοκαρδίας ("slow of heart"), whereas Peshiṭta has "deficient in his mind" (*ḥassir re'jāneh*).

¹⁹ That is: God in his interaction with the creation (humans or angels). The verb based on the same root consonants (*rmz*) is used in ln. 232.

²⁰ Prv 26:3. Peshiṭta has "a whip" (*šawṭā*) and "a goad" (*zeqtā*), respectively, for the horse and the donkey, and again "a goad" for the foolish man. The Masoretic text reads "a stick for the back of foolish people," using *šebet* "stick," which is the Hebrew cognate of *šabṭā* used in our text.

41. Different kinds of punishment goaded our soul like an animal,
and it (still) did not refrain from the evil of its shameful deeds.
43. Famine bent us down, (but) the loftiness of our mind did not bow down;
sickness beat us, (but) our arrogance did not weaken.
45. Death struck us and brought us inside the abyss of Sheol,
(but) our heart did not fear (this) terror full of terrors.
47. "Corpses of humans fell," as it is written, "like dung,"²¹
(but) our haughty arrogance did not fall from its loftiness.
49. The earth became dry and no longer gave us fruits and seeds,
(but) in its flow the wellspring of our licentiousness was not abated.
51. The air changed the different ways of the seasons that were created²² in it,
(but) the violence of our anger did not change from what it was. MI.102
53. Unusual thunder and lightning upset the earth,
(but) our inclination, so bitterly inclined,²³ was not disturbed in its harshness.
55. Hail destroyed vines and figs along with all other fruits,
(but) this sight, which was a sign of (divine) anger, did not trouble us.
57. Wonders took place, one more frightening than the other,
(but) our mind did not wonder what might be the cause of their appearance.
59. There was harm caused by locusts and crawling insects which we hadn't seen before,
(but) we did not ask why we were scourged so much.

²¹ Jer 9:21(22).

²² We follow Mingana's edition, reading *da-mkānin* (passive participle of the *af'el* form *akīn* "to constitute, create"). Sn (p. 656), Lb (f. 298r), Ld (f. 250r), and Te (p. 306b) read *da-mkannēn* (active or passive participle of the *pa'el* form *kanni* "to name, call."

²³ The same combination (*yašran marrir yašrā*, literally: our inclination, bitter of inclination) also occurs in ln. 373 (compare also ln. 543). A similar phrase, *marrirūt yašrā* "the bitterness of the inclination," is used in 4 Mc 3:4, as a rendering of *κακοήθεια* "evil disposition," while a comparable Greek expression, *κακοήθης διόθεσις* "ill-disposed attitude," in 4 Mc 1:25, is rendered in Syriac with *meṣṭalyānuṭā da-lwāt haššē bišē* "propensity for evil passions," which includes the term *meṣṭalyānuṭā* "propensity, liableness, inclination," which frequently occurs in the Syriac rewritings of Theodore of Mopsuestia's theology and exegesis, as a description of human mutability. See Becker, "The 'Evil Inclination'," 182 and 197–199.

- 61. Contemptible and undiscerning beings ate our food,
(but) we did not investigate who it was who gave us as food²⁴ to such contemptible beings.
- 63. We ran out of provisions, our work became idle, our lives nearly extinct,
(but) no one in our midst was able to stand up for us and help us.

Human iniquity upsets the entire creation

- 65. Woe to us! Will perhaps the harshness of the plagues make our race vanish?
Will there not remain a residue of our life among the inhabitants of the earth?
- 67. Woe to us! Will perhaps what happened in the past happen to us:
the fire of Sodom, and the abyss that swallowed the house of Dathan?²⁵
- 69. The kinds of evil that I just recounted exist among us,
and the pains with which our earth is struck attest that (indeed) they exist among us.
- 71. The pains of our earth I consider, which (indeed) are numerous among us,
and lo, I am prepared to set them down for those who listen.
- 73. Come, listeners, listen to the account of the kinds of our pains,
and fear and lament about the plagues of our evil generation.
- 75. Our evil generation has done much more evil than all other generations,
and that is why its plagues are much more numerous than (those of) all other generations.
- 77. That Hint which sees everything saw the ugliness of our iniquity,
and he turned the face of his kindness away from our ugly deeds.
- 79. The face of anger he showed to us (even though he is) without anger,
and the earth trembled and was near to becoming an abyss.
- 81. Our iniquity upset the entire creation by its iniquitousness,
and there was nothing that was not stirred up by our shameful deeds.
- 83. The sight of our shameful deeds put the entire world to shame,
and heavenly as well as earthly beings were disgusted by us.

²⁴ For the shift from the locusts eating the food of humans to the locusts eating the humans themselves, see below, ln. 215.

²⁵ Gn 19:23–25; Nm 16:30–33.

Spiritual beings are officially ordered to carry out the divine judgment

85. The spiritual beings saw the shameful appearance of our iniquity in its ugliness,
and were fully determined to punish it with the movements of the air.²⁶
87. They looked at our impudence and well-intended they took stock of it,
and they put on (their) weaponry in order to put down our tyrannical behavior. MI.103
89. The same Commandment that had assigned them to our service,
(now) ordered them to sign the contract of our punishment.
91. An official edict²⁷ of punishment was written by the King who is above all,
and he gave it to the assemblies of heavenly beings to bring it to us.
93. Like birds the flying beings took to the air ahead of the commandment,
and swiftly they put in place the different manners in which we were going to be beaten.
95. They saw that the verdict²⁸ concerning our beatings was urgent,
and urgently they carried out the wish of the One who sent them.
97. With straps of wind they aimed at our race, those kindred to our race,²⁹
and with blows of hunger and thirst they tortured our body.
99. The beings without bodies held in their hands combs (inflicting) pain;
they lacerated our body with the sharpness of their combs.
101. As a robber before the judge they hung our people,³⁰
and (the people) began to wail because of the harshness of the pains (inflicted) on it.
103. It was beaten and knocked down completely as a ferocious (animal);
and it howled and wailed, (but) the servants of the King did not want to listen.
105. The King of All gave an order concerning our people that loves iniquity,
that they would beat down our impudence without mercy.
107. The assemblies of heavenly beings (indeed) beat us without mercy,
and they probably would not have stopped our punishment until the end.

²⁶ I.e., with wind and storms. According to Narsai, authority over the wind and the movement of the air is specifically assigned to the angels. See *Homily 61 'On Creation II'*, 380–389 (ed. Gignoux 578–581).

²⁷ Narsai uses a Greek loanword for this technical legislative term: *σάκρα* “imperial letter,” itself from Latin *sacer* (to be added to A. M. Butts, “Latin Words in Classical Syriac,” *Hugoye* 19 [2016]: 149).

²⁸ Again, note the Greek loanword, this time of juridical content: *ἀπόφασις* “decree, verdict.”

²⁹ I.e., the angels.

³⁰ I.e., in order to be tortured.

109. They had looked and continued to look at the greatness of our iniquity all the time;
that is why the hand that they had³¹ was hanging above our back.
111. They knew for sure that we would not turn away from our ugly deeds,
and that is why they were clad in anger in order to exact punishment on us.
113. The debt of our sins had grown exceedingly big,
and lo, they demanded all sorts of interest, for they had waited³² so long (for our payment).
115. We³³ defaulted on our bill of debts beyond human measure,
and because we did not pay back, lo, we are now paying back without grace.³⁴
117. Our will acted so wrongfully with regard to the debt of our sins;
our punishments as well, therefore, are so much harsher than (those of) all (other) generations.
119. While we did not care, as debtors (should), to pay back the principal,
lo, we are paying back even interest upon interest.³⁵ Mt.104
121. Interests on interests we are required to pay according to our wickedness,
and still we are equal to offenders who committed great offenses.
123. We did commit great offenses, and our inclination attests that indeed our offenses were great,
and perhaps the demons do not commit offences as great as ours.
125. Demons commit offenses, they realize their deeds, and they know that they did wrong;
we (however) did not realize and denounce our ugly deeds.
127. Because we did not realize (our deeds), as would be suitable for intelligent people,
lo, irrational beings chastise us by their nature.
129. Because we did not want to judge ourselves in a judgment of our soul,
lo, the Righteous Hint judges us, (He) whose examination is just.

³¹ Literally: the hand that was in them, which is an awkward expression that may serve to reconcile the angels' bodiless nature (see Ln. 99) with their imagined carrying out of physical punishment.

³² Mingana's emendation is followed here: *d-ʿaggar(w)* (*afʿel*, perfect, 3rd pers. plur of *ngr* "to make last, to wait"). None of the manuscripts has the plural *waw*.

³³ Literally: our human (being) (*barnāšan*), which allows a wordplay with the following expression "beyond humanity" (*l-ḥar men nāšā*).

³⁴ Because human sin was so momentous, no intervention from God's grace can be expected, and humans are subjected to God's justice.

³⁵ Literally: interests that doubled (*d-ʿap*) interests, which is the reading of Mingana as well as Sn (p. 658) and Ld (f. 251v). Lb (f. 298v) and Te (p. 347b) read: interests that (are) upon (*d-ʿal*) interests.

131. The Chief of Judges handed over our judgment to the righteousness of his Hint,
so that we should know that there is with him also³⁶ invincible justice.
133. Very justly he pondered the judgment of our wrongdoing;
and he issued the verdict appropriate to the evil of those to be punished.
135. He placed our iniquity on the weighing scale of his investigation,
and since it (made the scales) tip so much, he issued punishments according to its heavy
[weight.
137. According to the different types of iniquity he distributed punishment among the iniquitous
and on each one of them he exacted punishment that was fitting to him.³⁷ [ones,
139. Love of money he rooted out with a good portion³⁸ of poverty,
lest it sprout forth again and bear the fruits of the allure of money.
141. Love of glory he cut down with the axe of humility,
lest it find ways to prick humans with the sting of (self-)extolment.
143. Gluttony he smashed with the iron of deprivation,
lest the fat that it produces run all over the body.
145. Haughtiness he subjected to the branding iron in order to tame it,
lest it rise up (again) and acquire the habit of wild animals.
147. Lying he bound with the weapon of (speaking with) a single word,
lest it get used to speaking superfluously.
149. Envy, he put the muzzle of silence on its mouth,
lest it bite humans with its furious teeth.
151. Theft he overpowered with overwhelming strength,
lest it rob again the possessions of human life.

³⁶ Justice is one aspect of God; the other is grace. But given the greatness of human sin, the time for grace has passed. Compare fn. 34.

³⁷ The following list of nine “types of iniquity” is reminiscent of the eight “bad thoughts” as listed by Evagrius Ponticus, especially in his *Praktikos*; see A. Guillaumont and C. Guillaumont, *Évagre le Pontique. «Traité pratique» ou «Le moine»* (SC 170–171; Paris: Cerf, 1971), 506–535. Several of the Syriac terms have their exact parallel in Greek. The bad thoughts of distress and listlessness in Evagrius’ list have no counterpart in Narsai, who instead adds lying, envy, and theft. That for each of the iniquities there is an appropriate punishment may somewhat reflect Evagrius’ idea of playing one bad thought off against another; see R. Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind. From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 358–371. For similar, but less structured lists of iniquities, see *Homily 25 ‘On Reproof’* (ed. Mingana 1.215–216) and Molenberg, “As if from Another World,” 107.

³⁸ Literally: with a spade, or shovel.

153. Adultery he struck with the plague of blindness upon the eyes,
lest it gaze lasciviously at what is not its own.
155. Anger he silenced with the frightful sounds of judgment,
lest it find room for its wild course.
157. All the passions he chastised rightly with his rightful punishments,
and wisely he showed his power over those who were punished. Mt. 105
159. All³⁹ feared his beatings, and all were overcome (by them),
and fear reigned over all whoever they were.⁴⁰

Punishment provoked by human iniquity affects the earth and the natural elements

161. All trembled as soon as this happened with regard to all;
and nothing remained that was not affected by the suffering of humans.
163. Because of humanity all these things happened in the dwelling place of humanity,
and due to their wickedness rational and irrational beings alike suffered these evils.
165. Because of (humanity) the earth was beaten with harsh scourges,
and its inner strength⁴¹ dried up, (suspending) the growth of seeds and fruits.
167. Because of (humanity's) iniquity the earth no longer wanted to produce new seeds,
and while she was a fertile mother, she became barren and unproductive.
169. Albeit without discernment, the earth looked at human barrenness,
and it held back the inner strength⁴² of the stream that was placed inside it.
171. (The earth's) example was followed by the connected natures of water and air,
and these (also) no longer ran properly on the smooth path of their seasons.
173. These silent beings, which (at first) were strictly ordered, adopted an unordered course,
and they unsettled the world which was well-ordered from the beginning.
175. Human iniquity taught the beings without senses
(how) to run on a path full of fear without harmony.

³⁹ The Syriac uses "everything," here and in the following lines, perhaps to underscore that the chaos affected all beings, not merely humans.

⁴⁰ Literally: over everything that is something.

⁴¹ Literally: its bosom, its inner recess.

⁴² Literally: its bosom, its inner recess.

177. Humanity unsettled the order of the entire creation,
and through its laxity it loosened the bond (that exists) between height and depth.
179. In (humanity) height and depth were bound together in harmony,⁴³
and because of (humanity) everything deteriorated from what it used to be.
181. The anger (of humans) angered the Power that never has in itself (the disposition) to be angry,
and he chastised the world with a harsh and merciless anger.
183. Merciless indeed has the punishment in our days become,
and undoubtedly human wickedness has never (before) been beaten like our wickedness.

**In contrast with previous punishments, in the present case humans fail to
understand the reason of the punishment**

185. But let us search in nature and in scripture,
whether⁴⁴ there is a generation that the Righteous One punished like our generation.
187. Earlier (generations) were beaten with harsh punishments, as it is written,
and he made known to them the reason for the punishments with which they were struck.
189. As for us, he punished us with all various sorts of punishments,
without revealing to us what the reason is for our harsh punishments.
191. For those who are punished this is harder than anything else,
that while they are punished, they don't know the reason for the punishment. Mt.106
193. Our iniquity kept the reason of our punishment hidden from our mind,
and did not allow us to look properly at the integrity of our soul.
195. Our iniquity itself blinded our soul from understanding,
and while (our soul) was despised as a result of the ugly deeds, it did not understand.
197. (Our iniquity) put a silencing muzzle on (our soul's) rationality,
and it hindered (our soul's) intellect from sharing in good things.

⁴³ The idea that humanity is the bond of the entire creation, which can be traced back to Theodore of Mopsuestia, plays an important role in Narsai's view of humanity as the image of God (Gn 1:26); see F. McLeod, "Man as the Image of God: Its Meaning and Theological Significance in Narsai," *Theological Studies* 42 (1981): 458–468.

⁴⁴ The correct reading, *d-ʿen*, is in Sn (p. 661). Mingana as well as Lb (f. 299v), Ld (f. 252v), and Te (p. 348a) read: *w-ʿen*. See Mingana, 105 fn. 1.

199. (Our iniquity) did not allow (our soul's) discernment to discern properly,
and while (our soul) was endowed with discernment, it acquired the habit of undiscerning
[beings.
201. This habit made (our soul) blind, without any understanding,
and it received beatings, without wanting to know the reason for its beatings.
203. Our soul, endowed with a sharp intellect, suffered harsh beatings,
and as much as it was beaten, the beatings seemed to it like no beatings at all.
205. However much the beatings increased, those who were beaten didn't suffer and didn't pay
the lashings doubled and those who were lashed became more courageous. [attention;
207. However much there were earthquakes,⁴⁵ trembling of the earth, implosion of mountains,
our heart remained untouched by the sound of wailing that the silent earth produced.
209. Residential buildings collapsed and became graveyards for their inhabitants,
(but) our haughty spirit did not come down from its arrogance.
211. The earth became deprived from produce of all sorts,
(but) as for our wicked inclination, its inclination did not refrain from ugly deeds.
213. Trees dried up, leaves fell off, and seeds withered,
(but) the dirty wellspring of our shameful deeds did not dry up.
215. Locusts ate us, beetles destroyed us, and crickets assailed us,
(but) the venom in our soul lost nothing from what it was.
217. Heavy winds blew in the summer and in the winter,
(but) the powerful blowing of our ugly deeds was even stronger.
219. (God) transformed the air and let rain pour down with stones of hail,
(but) our iniquitousness did not alter the course of its iniquity.
221. The silent beings trembled at the sounds of thunder and the sight of lightening,
(but) our laziness did not wake up from its sleep.
223. The spiritual beings depicted various signs in the firmament,
and we saw them and forgot them as (if they were) a dream.
225. They were true, accurate and plain,
and even our ugliness was not perceived by our depravity.

Mt.107

⁴⁵ The broad range of punishment and scourges is expanded here to include natural disasters, such as earthquakes.

227. It was our depravity that the powers on high showed (to us),
and we saw the (signs), (yet) we did not see them with the right mind.
229. For our sake all the things that happened did happen on the height and in the depth,
and we did not ask what the reason was of their successions.
231. Because we did not want to examine the question of the different types of our punishment,
the Creator hinted to his servants that they punish us (directly).⁴⁶
233. The watchers,⁴⁷ our kinfolk, took on the commandment concerning our wickedness,
and prepared our heart for a harsh punishment that matches our heart.

**A new punishment aims at humans directly, in their limbs and in their thoughts:
voracious death, captivity, hunger, and pain**

235. Because our heart did not sense the punishment which the earth endured on our behalf,
they struck us with pains in our limbs as much as in our thoughts.
237. Perhaps this (is what) they thought, wisely, with regard to our impudence:
“The skin that was beaten, when it was beaten, was not theirs.”⁴⁸
239. Humans have the habit to give up everything they have in order not to be beaten;
let, therefore, the fearful one be beaten and lo, he will become wise.
241. Inside himself he will taste the taste of harsh punishment,
and he will know how to keep the (right) order of his rationality.
243. With this purpose our limbs were beaten with harsh pains,
and lo, our miserable body was torn into pieces with (many) wounds.
245. In this way, the righteous ones⁴⁹ hurried to punish us,
and they did not cease, nor will they cease, to beat us, neither in summer nor in winter.
247. In all different forms the righteous ones castigated the stubbornness of our heart,
and when we failed to repent, death came and suddenly consumed us.

⁴⁶ While in the previous section the focus was on the punishment that the earth underwent on our behalf, from now on human beings are targeted directly. For that purpose, a new commandment is given.

⁴⁷ This term (*irā*, plural *irē*) is used for the angels, as is its Aramaic predecessor in Dn 4:10 and 14.

⁴⁸ Perhaps they thought that the previous punishment had not been effective, because it did not hit humans in their own body. A different approach was needed.

⁴⁹ I.e., the angels.

249. Beyond all measure ravenous death is causing destruction among us,
and pitilessly it tears our body apart most cruelly.
251. As a captor (death) comes after our race all the time,
and its captivity is worse than the captivity that humans inflict on each other.
253. Humans took us captive and death took us captive, a double captivity,
and the captivity (caused) by our ugly deeds⁵⁰ is worse than these two captivities.
255. The captivity of our iniquity is worse than the captivity (caused) by humans and by death,
and perhaps this (third captivity) has prepared the path for the two (other) captivities.
257. Woe to our people (confronted) with such captors who always surround it,
and who destroy it, while it (still) is not ashamed of its shameful deeds.
259. Woe to us, who have become the (source of) contempt and disgrace in front of all creatures;
and both rational and irrational beings reprove the greatness of our contempt.
261. Woe to us, for the evil news (about us) has gone out in all directions;
and there is no one in the (entire) creation who does not recount the story of our iniquity.
- Mt.108
263. The infamy of our wickedness, (even) the demons recount it, who are more wicked than we,
and even in their wickedness they are amazed at our wicked deeds.
265. If the wicked ones are amazed at us for the evil we have done,
then truly our evil deeds have become mighty and our pains numerous.⁵¹
267. Hunger and pains afflict our lives for good reason,
and perhaps they save our iniquitousness from double iniquity.
269. It is our iniquity that the Just One castigates with hunger and pains,
and He keeps us under control lest we run wild in our pursuit of crime.
271. If not, let us investigate what the reason might be for the harshness of our punishments,
and why there is this scantiness and insufficiency of food for our lives.
273. Why is our time in such disarray more than all (other) times,
without there being a moment that the course of our life is serene and pleasant?
275. Why are the seasons of the year so gloomy in their cycle,
without there being one cycle whose order resembles normalcy?

⁵⁰ I.e., our addiction to evil, which is portrayed here as yet another captivity.

⁵¹ This line suggests that the general term "evil" (*bišā* and its derivatives) refers both to the evil perpetrated by humans and to the punishment inflicted on them.

277. Everything is in chaos, everything is confused, and everything is gloomy,
and the world has become like a house of wailing for its inhabitants.
279. Creation is clothed in great mourning for our evil deeds,
and it grieves over us as over a deceased one who is bitterly mourned.
281. The earth is affected with extreme bitterness because of us,
and if it were able, it would cry out as a mother (would) over her beloved.
283. And if it had a mouth to talk, like beings endowed with speech,
with a wailing sound it would bewail our evil time.
285. And if the irrational natures were able to sense the suffering of our soul,
they would not cease to groan over our humiliation.
287. Greatly have we been pulled down to earth, as it is written,⁵²
and on behalf of the earth, our soul was struck with contempt and disgrace.
289. As a tempest our evil deeds blew in our evil time,
and they stripped us and left us like trees in winter time.
291. Just like leaves (dropping from a tree), good things receded from the mouth of humans,
and humans became like non-humans in their actions.
293. With harsh pains mortals were beaten to death,
and they shriveled and withered from the agony and pain of hunger.

The sword of hunger and human debasement as a result of hunger

295. The sword of hunger was drawn against our people reveling in sin,
and slaughtered us and threw us down like animals (abandoned) without burial.
297. What was written about the ancients came to fulfilment with us:
"Like dung the corpses of humans are falling."⁵³
299. Lo, bodies of humans fell without being buried,
and people walked over (dead) people shamelessly.
301. Hunger shut the door of mercy in the face of mercy,
and one human being trampled over another human being as (if he was) not human.

MT.109

⁵² Ob 1:3.

⁵³ Jer 9:21(22). The same biblical verse is quoted in ln. 47.

303. Hunger overpowered nature by its severe strength,
and began its assault on both nature and scripture.⁵⁴
305. Due to hunger miserable nature forgot its nature,
and debased itself to eating food out of the ordinary.
307. Out of the ordinary humans ate the flesh of humans.
Woe to us! What has happened to our nature capable of (so much) harm?
309. Woe to us! Is perhaps the end of the world arriving in our time?
Are all the things written about the end being fulfilled among us?
311. It is written that women ate their children in the time of hunger,
and that beloved babies of the womb became food for the womb.⁵⁵
313. Lo, what happened once (long ago) has happened in our evil time,
and women have eaten their children and (what they received as) a price for them.⁵⁶
315. For an insignificant price parents gave away their beloved children,
and they ate food that was full of sorrow, and died in anguish.
317. For a morsel of bread a mother took the price of her beloved (child);
her eye teared up and her soul languished from sadness.
319. Oh that food, which nature bought contrary to (its) habit!
Nature forsook the natural (feelings) that had been implanted in it.
321. Oh (that) nature, locked up entirely in love of itself,
which sold its own for love of food (giving relief for) one moment!

⁵⁴ For the combination of nature and scripture, see ln. 185.

⁵⁵ This horrific scene is described as taking place in 2 Kgs 6:25–29 (during the famine in Samaria), Lam 2:20, and Lam 4:10. It is predicted or issued as a threat in Lv 26:29 and Jer 19:9. In addition to the biblical passages, Narsai may have been familiar with a famous passage in Josephus, *Jewish War*, 6:4–5 (§201–219). The passage in Josephus is referred to (with the specific attribution to Josephus), in Isho'dad of Merv's *Commentary on Leviticus*, see C. Van den Eynde, *Commentaire d'Išo'dad de Merv sur l'Ancien Testament*, II. *Exode — Deutéronome* (CSCO 176, 179; Louvain: Peeters, 1958), 85 (text) and 115 (translation). For the Syriac translation of the Jewish War, see L. Van Rompay, "Flavius Josephus' *Jewish War* in Syriac: Ms. Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana B 21 inf. and two recently Studied Manuscripts from Deir al-Surian," in A. Fedeli et al. (eds.), *Gli Studi di Storiografia. Tradizione, memoria e modernità* (Orientalia Ambrosiana 6; Milan: Biblioteca Ambrosiana, 2019), esp. 435–438.

⁵⁶ The masculine suffix ("their" in "their value," *ṭimayhon*) refers to "the children". The word means "price, value" and may refer to the price parents obtained for selling their children in order to be able to buy food. The same word is used in ln. 315; its synonym *dmayyā* is used in ln. 317.

323. Oh, what happened to our race, the first of all races?
It debased itself with despicable acts of absolute depravity.
325. Oh nature of ours, named with the name of its Creator,⁵⁷
which became a wreck, and even wretched beings⁵⁸ derided its wreckage!
327. Oh the one exalted above all and more glorious than all in his name and his rank,⁵⁹
downtrodden by suffering,⁶⁰ brought down by pains, and devoured by death!
329. Oh the one who was holding the entire world (together) in his body and in his soul,⁶¹
who has become more hateful than all because of his iniquity!
331. Because of his iniquity rational and irrational beings all together hated him,
and lo, they are beating him with harsh punishments of all sorts.

Permanent hunger, endless wailing, and everyone begging

333. (There is) severe hunger, innumerable pains, and premature death,
without any comfort between one punishment and the next one. Mt.110
335. Like the waves (of the sea) beatings are rolling rapidly one after the other,
and they give us not even a little respite and rest.
337. The sound of wailing reverberates on our earth at all times,
and our life has been rendered a house of wailing night and day.
339. Weeping in the streets, wailing in the houses, moaning everywhere;
(our) mouth is wailing, (our) eyes are shedding tears, (our) ears are tingling.⁶²
341. Weeping and lamentation one hears at every hour from every mouth,
and there is no human who doesn't utter sounds of woe.

⁵⁷ The poet plays with the roots *kyn* "to exist" (from which "nature" and the word used here for "Creator" derive) and *kny* "to name": *ʾo la-kyānan mḵannay ba-šmā da-mḵinānēh*.

⁵⁸ Perhaps the demons are meant.

⁵⁹ I.e., humanity.

⁶⁰ The Syriac word *ḥaššē* seems to refer to suffering to which humans are exposed as a result of their sins (nearly synonymous to *kēḥē*) rather than to human (mostly sinful) emotions, which caused their sinfulness.

⁶¹ The idea that humanity, in its soul and body, binds the whole creation together may be traced back to Theodore of Mopsuestia; see, e.g., F. Petit, *Catena Graeca in Genesim et in Exodum*, II. *Collectio Coisliniana in Genesim* (CCSG 15; Turnhout: Brepols, 1986), 69–70 (no. 71) and is echoed throughout East-Syriac theological and exegetical literature. See also note 43.

⁶² For the tingling of the ears at the time of disaster, compare 1 Sm 3:11, 2 Kg 21:12, and Jer 19:3.

343. Woe! Woe! — says one human being to another human being about humanity,
whose good things have vanished, whose sorrows have multiplied, whose groans have doubled.
345. Groaning sounds one hears at every hour from one's companion,
and there is no sound (whatsoever) which is not composed of human distress.
347. Everyone is in distress, everyone is in grief, and everyone weeps,
and there is not one single face⁶³ that is shining and cheerful toward one's neighbor.
349. Everyone is sorrowful at the sorrowful sight of others,
and everyone is amazed at the hardships that has come to reign on the earth.
351. Concerning these hardships everyone asks the one he chances upon,
"Is there a place of rest, away from these hardships?"
353. Together all are overwhelmed by hardships upon hardships,
and the heads of kings and masters bow down to these hardships.
355. The rich one is distressed, the poor one is distressed, the servant and his master,
and everyone has gone out begging for the necessities of his life.
357. They went out begging, both the beggars and those who never begged,⁶⁴
and hunger unsettled the great order of society.⁶⁵
359. Hunger taught noblemen⁶⁶ how to beg,
and lo, they go around and ask for alms as beggars (do).
361. The craft of begging greatly increased upon the earth,
and there is no moment when the sound of begging doesn't resound.
363. People utter doleful sounds in front of their neighbors,
for they weep and wail and make those who hear them join in their weeping.
365. Like animals they groan all the time along with their neighbors,
cooing and chirping like pigeons and swallows.
367. The sound of their groaning does not even resemble human (sound),
for hunger has altered their words and their cries.

MLIII

⁶³ Or: person (*parṣopā*).

⁶⁴ Literally: and the non-beggars.

⁶⁵ Literally: the great order between one and the other.

⁶⁶ Or: freemen.

369. The one in need modulates the sounds of groaning according to his needs,
(hoping) that the (specific) nature of his cries will move the one who hears them.
371. Shamelessly he annoys and implores with boldness and impudence,
and swears and makes an oath: If I don't get (anything), I am not going away.

**Human iniquity uprooted human freedom and is the only one to blame for
the suffering**

373. What did our evil inclination — so bitterly inclined — do
to uproot from us the freedom of (our) soul,⁶⁷ sowing (instead) impudence?
375. Freedom of the soul does the soul possess since its creation,
and this is astounding, that hunger overpowers it so as to transcend hunger.⁶⁸
377. Hunger made a free soul unfree,
and it became a maidservant serving the bodily need.
379. The need of the body subjected (the soul) to the yoke of the need of the body,⁶⁹
and it began to compose groaning sounds to ask for alms.
381. A horrendous thing iniquity accomplished in our evil generation,
by perturbing the beauty of body and soul.⁷⁰
383. Beautiful indeed was the natural order implanted in (the soul),
and tyrannical iniquity (raging) in iniquitous people corrupted it.
385. Iniquity is the reason of those things which I recounted and will recount,
and it is (iniquity) that castigated us with hunger, pains, and pestilence.
387. It is (iniquity) that deprived beautiful earth of its bounty,
stopping it from giving us fruits and seeds as it used to do.

⁶⁷ With “freedom of the soul” perhaps “dignity” or “restraint” is meant, i.e., the ability to act without compulsion. For the semantic field of *hēruṭā* “freedom,” see Sh. Naeh, “Freedom and Celibacy: A Talmudic Variation on Tales of Temptation and Fall in Genesis and its Syrian Background,” in J. Frishman and L. Van Rompay (eds.), *The Book of Genesis in Jewish and Oriental Christian Interpretation. A Collection of Essays* (TEG 5; Louvain: Peeters, 1997), 76–83.

⁶⁸ Literally: hunger overpowers it toward non-hunger.

⁶⁹ I.e., so that it lost its freedom.

⁷⁰ For reflections on body and soul in Narsai, see J. E. Walters, “Where Soul Meets Body: Narsai’s Depiction of the Soul-Body Relationship in Context,” in Butts, Heal, and Kitchen (eds.), *Narsai: Rethinking his Work and his World*, 227–253.

389. It is (iniquity) that produced locusts, beetles, and crickets as well,
transformed the air, and brought down fire instead of drops of rain.
391. No harm ever harmed us which (iniquity) didn't produce,
and no shortage (ever) struck our race which (iniquity) didn't cause.
393. Our iniquity, therefore, we would need to blame,
rather than our God, who made us righteous and free.
395. It would befit our freedom to blame itself for its own non-freedom,
for why did a free being become unfree?
397. Because as a discerning being (our freedom) did not understand that it had to blame itself,
sufferings exacted harsh punishments (consisting) of various kinds of damage.
399. Harsh is the damage that our soul has come to suffer at this time,
and there is no weight that outweighs the gravity of the damage upon us.

The present suffering is more severe than anything in the past

401. Paltry is the damage in all (previous) generations compared to our damage,
and the beatings that our soul suffers attest to how great our damage has become.
403. The various ways of our afflictions cannot be spoken of in human language,
and no mouth is able to recount them as they are.
405. That they occurred is the only thing one is able to say about them, MI.112
how and how many, no⁷¹ tongue is able to show.
407. That they occurred, even I said that I wanted to report it,
(but) their total amount my mind is unable to comprehend.
409. Their great number made me want to investigate them,
(but) I was seized by amazement and I greatly failed in my investigation.
411. My thoughts mounted a wagon (full) of words on the road of words,
and I wanted to journey along with the words to the real facts.

⁷¹ The negation is absent from all manuscripts; we follow Mingana, who proposes to add it, while changing the emphatic state *leššānā* to the absolute *leššān*: *lā mṣē leššān* instead of *mṣē leššānā*. It is not entirely impossible to preserve the reading of the manuscript, if one reads the second line as a rhetorical question: "how and how many (they are), is a tongue able to show (this)?"

413. The various ways of what happened on our earth I wanted to recount,
(but) as I saw how numerous they were, my speech faltered.
415. My speech itself stood in fear at the beginning of its speaking,
(fearing) that it would not stay firm and reach the end.
417. I saw the span of words that (my speech) was going to assemble,⁷²
and I greatly feared to put together words of such content.
419. Frightful indeed are stories of hardships when they are told,
and it is far from easy to recount the tale of harsh punishments.
421. Compelled by the punishments I embarked on telling the story of the punishments,
and my mind forced me to weave a garment that is replete with punishments.
423. For the sake of words⁷³ I intended to investigate those who were punished,
lest they would be exposed to the eye of onlookers who look attentively.
425. I saw attentive onlookers who were eager to see (as) much (as possible),
and I painted an image of the various ways of punishment for them to look at.⁷⁴
427. Come, attentive onlookers, look at our hardships,
how much we have been beaten and how much we scorned our punishments.
429. Our mind resembled wild animals before our hardships,
they subdue them, (but) they don't let themselves be subdued until the very end.
431. Punishments goaded our impudence as (they do) animals,
and however much (our impudence) was beaten, it (always) regained strength to act ferociously.
433. The Just One put the muzzle of hunger on our evil mouth,
but the course of our wickedness did not turn away from its evil.
435. With straps of stones he stretched our body before beating it,
and it was beaten severely and (yet) it was full of scorn, as if it did not suffer.

⁷² The different meanings of the root *rkb* allow the poet to describe the composition of a text with the image of "loading a wagon" (ln. 411). In the following verses he uses the image of "weaving a garment" (ln. 422) and "painting an image" (ln. 426).

⁷³ Perhaps this means: For the sake of the argument. The poet wants to carry out his own investigation in order to understand and rationalize the severity of the punishments instead of merely be confronted with the sight of them.

⁷⁴ For painting imagery in Narsai, see E. M. Rodrigo Gómez, "Painting Metaphors as a Means of Theological Expression in Narsai," in Butts, Heal, and Kitchen (eds.), *Narsai: Rethinking his Work and his World*, 187–197.

437. The one who suffered pains became free of pains at the moment of pains,
and the nature that was shaped in mortality forgot its nature.⁷⁵
439. The one who was punished was brought by his pains to the threshold of death,
and the soul trembled, and fled from inside its dwelling place.
441. In the temple of the body Lady Soul was sitting, M1.113
and pains destroyed the temple of its love and she fled from it.
443. If the soul fled from us at the time of our punishments,
(then) everyone knows the (severity of the) beatings that we suffered.
445. Death is the end of life for those who are punished,
it is clear, therefore, that the way we were beaten is harsher than (all other) beatings.
447. Perhaps someone who hears (this) will say: death is death,
but he should hear this: there is death that is worse than (any other) death.
449. Our death is worse than all (other) deaths that were or will be,
for we saw our death, and then we died, (which is) a double death.
451. We saw the sight of death, as punishment for our misdeeds,
and before (actually) dying, we died at the sight of our severe punishments.
453. Hunger and pains served as guides to a certain death,
and (death) approached and swallowed us, as the serpent (swallowed) the (other) beasts.⁷⁶
455. In all different manners death swallowed our mortality,
and perhaps no remnant of life is left in our human condition.
457. All trials traversed our soul, the possessor of life,
and perhaps (now) the source of life is dwindling and our body has come to naught.
459. (Our soul) possesses incorruptible life in its being (as a gift) from the Creator,
and (only) through its life force our mortal body is alive and walking.
461. If the soul wouldn't preserve us with the power of its vitality,
the human race would become like non-human.

⁷⁵ I.e., when humans were punished, they denied their pains and forgot their vulnerable nature, thereby rejecting God's corrective measures.

⁷⁶ The image seems to be based on Ex 7:12, where the serpent originating from Aaron's rod swallowed the serpents produced by Pharaoh's wise men. For the serpents of the Egyptians the poet uses "wild animals" (*haywat šennā* "animals of teeth" or "beasts"), a noun which includes the root "life," in anticipation of his reflections on life in the following verses.

463. Like non-human we have become through the punishment for all our misdeeds,
and both rational and irrational beings marveled and were bewildered at our destruction.
465. About our destruction heaven and earth weep and wail,
and we alone are not aware of the destruction of our race.
467. The course of summer and winter is darkened as a result of our ugly deeds,
and the great order of the months of the year is confused and disturbed.
469. Because of us creation is clothed in garments of mourning;
it wails about us as about a dead person (who is the subject) of bitter mourning.
471. More bitter is the mourning on the day of our anguish than all (other) mourning;
and more quiet the day of our death than the days of our harsh punishments.
473. Under punishments and pains the days of our life vanished away,
and not a single day in our life on earth is free from anxieties.
475. Since our childhood pains have reared us, as it is written,⁷⁷
and as we grew wounds on our limbs became manifest.

**The pains of our race from the very beginning: exile from Paradise,
exile through the Flood, exile from Babel, perpetual enslavement, and despair**

477. Pains have struck us from the very beginning of our race;
and afflictions were like a guide on the course of our lives. Mt.114
479. The life that we lived on earth was an object of envy⁷⁸ since the day that we existed;
and harsh challenges due to envy never ceased from us.
481. We had wicked neighbors in the land of our sojourning;
they robbed us of our possessions and subdued our lives with harsh labor.
483. In an iniquitous captivity the haters of our race⁷⁹ led us away,
and enslaved us to the desires of their deeds.

⁷⁷ Gn 8:21.

⁷⁸ Literally: an enviable life. We translate the reading of Sn (p. 674), Lb (f. 302v), Ld (f. 258r), and Te (p. 351b): *ḥayyē ḥsimē*. In contrast, Mingana reads *ḥayyē smimē* “a poisoned life,” which is much less likely and may be a typo in the edition. According to Narsai, the special honor and authority that God accorded to humanity led to Satan’s envy right from the beginning. See *Homily 49 ‘On Creation IV’*, 101–123 (ed. Gignoux).

⁷⁹ The phrase “hater of our race” is often used for Satan; here it seems to have a broader meaning.

485. As exiles our fathers went out of paradise,⁸⁰
and settled in a land that was full of thorns, pains, and death.
487. An exile of water⁸¹ drove them out from there as well,
and would that it were only exile rather than merciless destruction!
489. The exile of the flood of water destroyed us mercilessly,
and it washed away the dust of our bodily constitution and buried it in the earth.
491. One exile passed us on to the next exile, one after the other,
without granting us to stay for a while in the land of our sojourning.
493. The first exile banned us from the beautiful land of Eden;
the second from the inheritance which was full of thorns.⁸²
495. The next exile expelled us from Babel through the division (of the languages),⁸³
and dispersed our lump of clay⁸⁴ in all four directions on sea and on dry land.
497. Three exiles, each one worse than the other, expelled our race,
and One from Our Race⁸⁵ set our race free from slavery.
499. An evil habit nestled itself in our race from the beginning,
and found pleasure in enslaving slaves (depriving them) of freedom.
501. The free one⁸⁶ preferred the non-freedom of the labor of slaves,
and did not wish to lift his head up from slavery.
503. This habit caused him to be beaten by harsh punishments,
and lo, he was torn apart with wounds in body and soul.
505. In his body and his soul he continued to sin and continued to be beaten,
and he was stretched out all the time for severe punishments, without being ashamed.
507. The harshness of his beatings accompanied him throughout all generations,
and particularly in our generation the afflictions doubled.

⁸⁰ Gn 3:23–24. Following the discussion of human misery in general terms, the author now proceeds with a selection of examples from biblical history.

⁸¹ I.e., the flood in Noah's day (Gn 7–8).

⁸² Gn 3:18. Narsai refers to the land in which the Adamites dwelled after their expulsion from paradise and prior to the flood.

⁸³ Gn 11:7.

⁸⁴ I.e., as an image of humanity.

⁸⁵ In Narsai's poetry this is a common designation for Christ, highlighting his humanity. This brief Christological reference is a rare positive note in this homily.

⁸⁶ I.e., the human being endowed with freedom.

509. Harsh punishments from all sides, lo, surround us,
and lo, we are beaten, (but) the various manners of our evil (still) do not come to an end.
511. Our evil and shameful deeds have multiplied beyond number,
and have greatly punished our impudence, beyond limit.
513. Our punishments were harsher than any punishments in any generation,
and there was no pause between one (punishment) and the next one, not even for an instant.⁸⁷
515. The Hidden Hint gathered the (punishments) together with a view to (saving) our life,
and instructed them how to wage war with our wickedness. ML1115
517. They waged a great war and imposed on us punishments⁸⁸ that are (appropriate) to us;
and ripped apart our people with pointed arrows of hunger and thirst.
519. As (if they were a whole) army, pains surrounded us on all sides,
and not a single body escaped without being hurt with wounds.
521. Our entire body became an open sore without (hope of) healing,
it was disgusting to physicians, and they no longer bandaged it.
523. Hunger and pains lacerated the (human) body and troubled the soul,
and (human) life ran out of food and of the life-force (itself).
525. There is no life-force (left) in the life of humans, nothing at all,
and if there is (some), there (still) isn't, for there is nothing to sustain life.
527. Food to sustain life is lacking from the mouth of life,
and everyone short of life sees his life before his eyes held in limbo.⁸⁹
529. With his life cut short (everyone) all the time is envisioning the end of his life,
wondering in fear whether his appointed time⁹⁰ has arrived.
531. In the evening he says, "Will I make it until the morning?"
and in the morning time he asks his friends, "Has the sun gone down?"⁹¹

⁸⁷ Literally: wink, or hint (*remzā*), used here without a theological connotation, in contrast to the many occurrences of the term in Narsai, where it is a designation for God, as in the very next line.

⁸⁸ I.e., personified punishments issue punishments.

⁸⁹ Literally: his life was hung up/held in suspension.

⁹⁰ For this rare term, *prtwzmyh* (from Greek *προθεσμία*), see M. Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon*, 1256a, and A. M. Butts, *Language Change in the Wake of Empire: Syriac in its Greco-Roman Context* (LSAWS 11; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2016), 72. The vocalization provided in the edition as well as in the manuscripts is: *prātozmīyēh* (four syllables are needed). In *Homily 71 'On the Flood'* (ed. Frishman, 2.23.15: "the appointed time for the Creation"), the manuscripts are divided between *prtwzmy* (*prātozmīyā*) and *prwtwzmy* (*protozmīyā*).

⁹¹ Compare Dt 28:67, with its description of the hopeless situation in which the Israelites will be when they do not heed the prescriptions of the Law.

533. With every day (passing) he goes on worrying about his afflictions,
for with each (passing) hour of night and day his torture is being doubled.
535. Woe to the wretched nature of the human being, for how troubled it is!
How innumerable are the sufferings of his soul and the pains of his body!
537. Woes accompany the (human being,) more wretched than all⁹² throughout all generations,
and in this generation of ours he is (even) more wretched than in all (previous) generations.
539. In our generation every human being is wretched and miserable,
woes are double, punishment is manifold, and torture is great.
541. Great is the torture that our eyes have seen and our ears have heard,
pains have persecuted us, and people have persecuted us, two (persecutions) in one.
543. Our human being, bitter in his inclination, has endured captivity of hunger,
and captivity by (other) people, worse than hunger and (worse) than all evils.

**Historical context: captivity at the hands of the sons of Hagar,
by the Kedeshites and Temurites — iniquity beaten by iniquity**

545. Captivity by the sons of Hagar⁹³ was worse even than famine,
and more bitter than sickness was it to be beaten by them.
547. Being lashed by the sons of Abram⁹⁴ resembles the poison of a serpent;
perhaps for the poison of reptiles there is a remedy,⁹⁵ for them there isn't.
549. Would that the sons of the Egyptian woman had not been called by Abraham's name!
For lo, ignorant people find fault with this name.

⁹² Note the sound effects with the labial consonants *w* and *l*: *wāyā lwē lēh la-dwē men kul*.

⁹³ "The sons of Hagar," "the Hagarenes" (ln. 568: *hāgrāyē*), and "the Ishmaelites" (ln. 570 and 588) are names for the Arabs, based on the assumed descent of the Arabs from Ishmael, the son of Abraham and his Egyptian maidservant (Gn 16:1 and 15); see S. H. Griffith, "Free Will in Christian *Kalām*: Moshe bar Kepha against the Teachings of the Muslims," *Le Muséon* 100 (1987): 151–152 and T. Hainthaler, *Christliche Araber vor dem Islam* (ECS 7; Louvain: Peeters, 2007), 17–20. For unrest among the Arab tribes around the Roman-Persian frontier and in the region of Nisibis in the late fifth century, see J.-M. Fiey, *Nisibe, métropole syriaque orientale et ses suffragants des origines à nos jours* (CSCO 388; Louvain: Peeters, 1977), 43–45. In this final section of the homily, the author discusses contemporary experiences of political unrest and human suffering, which must have contributed to the overall feeling of unsafety and agitation (and concomitant awareness of human sinfulness), transpiring throughout the homily.

⁹⁴ Note that Narsai oscillates between Abram and Abraham throughout this passage depending on metrical requirements.

⁹⁵ Or: a means or a way (to deal with it) (Syriac *pursā*); compare Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon*, 1171a.

551. Would that the righteous (Abraham) had not touched that foolish woman! Ml.116
Perhaps these offensive people would stop their offenses.
553. Would that they had a different name, different from Abram!
And that they would have been called “savage ones” after their father!
555. The Creator called the head of their tribes “a wild ass of the field,”⁹⁶
because he knew that he would not be able to respect human order.
557. It would be fitting for the son of the Egyptian woman to be called an “animal-man,”
and to take away from him the name of Abraham, lover of mankind.
559. A lover of mankind and a lover of his Lord is Abraham;
it would then be appropriate for the righteous one⁹⁷ to have righteous children.
561. Abraham should not be blamed for having begotten evil and savage people;
the evil people should be blamed for not having traveled on the path of Abram’s love.
563. Even I, who (just) issued blame, my words deserve all sorts of blame,
for I said, “Would that Abram had not touched Hagar the maidservant!”
565. Parents are not able to shape the freedom of the soul;
freedom of the soul itself makes righteous people as well as iniquitous ones.
567. To those who blame Abram I said and I say:
If the Hagarenes took us captive for no reason, why did others (do it)?
569. Were perhaps the Kedeshites⁹⁸ relatives of the sons of Hagar?
They plundered the world in an act of plunder that surpasses that of the Ishmaelites!

⁹⁶ Gn 16:12. Instead of “a wild ass of the field” (*ṛādā d-ḥarrā*), Peshitta reads “a wild ass of humans” (*ṛādā da-ḥnaynāšā*). For the connection of this verse with the Arabs, see G. J. Reinink, “Ismael, der Wildesel in der Wüste. Zur Typologie der Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodios,” *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 75 (1982): 342–344.

⁹⁷ The reading of Mingana and of Ld (f. 259v) is followed here (“the righteous one” must refer to Abraham). Sn (p. 677), Lb (f. 617r), and Te (p. 352b) read the plural (“the righteous ones”), making this conclusion into a general statement.

⁹⁸ The Kedeshites and Ṭemurites (ln. 571) are both mentioned in the *Chronicle* of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite (written shortly after 506). The name of the Kedeshites also occurs in one of the homilies attributed to Isaac of Antioch, and the Ṭemurites make an appearance in the *Chronicle* of Pseudo-Zachariah VII.6 (mid-sixth century). Both peoples lived in the Persian Empire and rebelled against King Kawad (r. 488–531). Of the Kedeshites it is said that they sought “to enter Nisibis and establish one of their own as king in it.” See W. Wright, *The Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1882), 17–18 (Syr.) and F. R. Trombley and J. W. Watt, *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite* (TTH 32; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 19–20, with note 96 (“Qadishaye” and “Tamuraye”). See also fn. 101 below.

571. Does the genealogy of the Ṭemurites descend perhaps from Abram?⁹⁹
They made Atur, the mother of kings, into deserted land!
573. Therefore we should blame neither parents nor children,
but the inclination that distinguishes between (these) two: good and evil.
575. We should blame the evil inclination of the sons of Hagar at all times,¹⁰⁰
and in particular the people of Kedes̄h,¹⁰¹ (behaving) like animals.
577. The nature of animals is not as savage as the Kedes̄hites;
and lo, (there is) proof of their lack of civilization in everything they do.
579. The troops of the sons of Hagar did not behave like they¹⁰² did,
and the Ṭemurites did not wreak destruction as they did.
581. The (Kedes̄hites') destruction surpassed that of the peoples of the south and of the north, Ml.117
and perhaps there is no evil that compares to the evil they inflicted in our land.
583. Our land, full of iniquity, has suffered these punishments,
and through iniquitous people, who are worse than we (are), our chastisement has taken place.
585. By means of evil people, who are worse than we (are), the Creator has castigated us,
so that, when iniquity is beaten by iniquity, we may despise (iniquity) itself.

⁹⁹ With these two rhetorical questions (ln. 569 and 571, implying negative answers), Narsai points out that these two peoples, while not being related to the Arabs (*pace* Trombley and Watt, *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite*, 20), were equally brutal. Just as evil is not inherited from parents to children (and, therefore, Abraham cannot be blamed for the evil committed by the Arabs), the perpetration of evil is not determined by kinship, but is based on human freewill.

¹⁰⁰ The reading of Mingana as well as Lb (f. 303v), Ld (f. 259v), and Te (p. 352b) is followed here (*kulšā*). Sn (p. 678) reads *kulnāš*, i.e., "everyone should blame..."

¹⁰¹ The geographical name occurs in 2 Kg 15:29, Ps 29:8, Tb 1:2, and Jdt 1:9. Whether there is any connection between the biblical name and the Kedes̄hites mentioned in this homily remains unclear. Among the scribes of the late nineteenth century there was doubt about the name. The edition of Mingana and the scribes of Lb (f. 303v) and Te (p. 352b) simply read Kedes̄h (Syriac *qdēš*). In Ld (f. 259v), however, either the scribe or a reader changed the *dalath* into a *resh*, by crossing out the dot below the letter and by adding a new dot above the letter (resulting in the reading *qrēš*). The same intervention took place in ln. 569, 576, and 588 (resulting in the reading Kereshites, Syriac *qrēšāyē*). In Sn (pp. 677–678), the scribe added, within the text, to the name Kedes̄h the name written with *resh* and made similar additions in ln. 576 and 588 (he thus left the two options open and read: Kedes̄h-Keresh and Kedes̄hites-Kereshites). Those who initiated these changes wanted to suggest perhaps that a connection existed with the name of the Arab tribe of the Quraysh, into which the Prophet Muhammad was born. Whether there were pre-modern antecedents for this connection in the tradition of Narsai's homilies remains unknown. According to our author the Kedes̄hites are not Arabs. The usual spelling of the name Quraysh in Syriac sources is *quryš*.

¹⁰² I.e., the Kedes̄hites.

587. Iniquity has raised up three tribes¹⁰³ (to fight) against our wickedness:
the Ishmaelites, the Ṭemurites, and the Kedeshtites.
589. With three whips our soul has been beaten, filled as it was with pride,
by three tribes puffed with pride even more than we.

Concluding reflection: The Creator is just, our punishment was decreed in wisdom

591. Just is the Creator who has punished our iniquity by means of iniquitous people,
and just is it for us to acknowledge: Yes, our chastisement was done justly.
593. For our benefit the all-powerful Commandment has punished us,
And it wisely decreed pain in response to our shameful deeds.
595. Come, let us give thanks to the Wisdom that has bandaged our wounds,
and let us offer it the gift of praise, for it punished and accepted (us).¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ The same word (*šabṭā*) also has the meaning “staff, rod” as a means of punishment, a notion that is elaborated upon in the following verses. Compare fn. 20 above.

¹⁰⁴ With these two short verbs (*dā-rdāt wa-qnāt*, literally: for it (i.e., the Divine Wisdom) punished and acquired, or possessed), spoken in one breath, the homily comes to an abrupt end. The final verb, indicating that Divine Wisdom does not renounce possession of humanity (and repeating that punishment is an integral part of its care for humanity), conveys a powerful positive note at the very end of this otherwise very somber composition.

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